THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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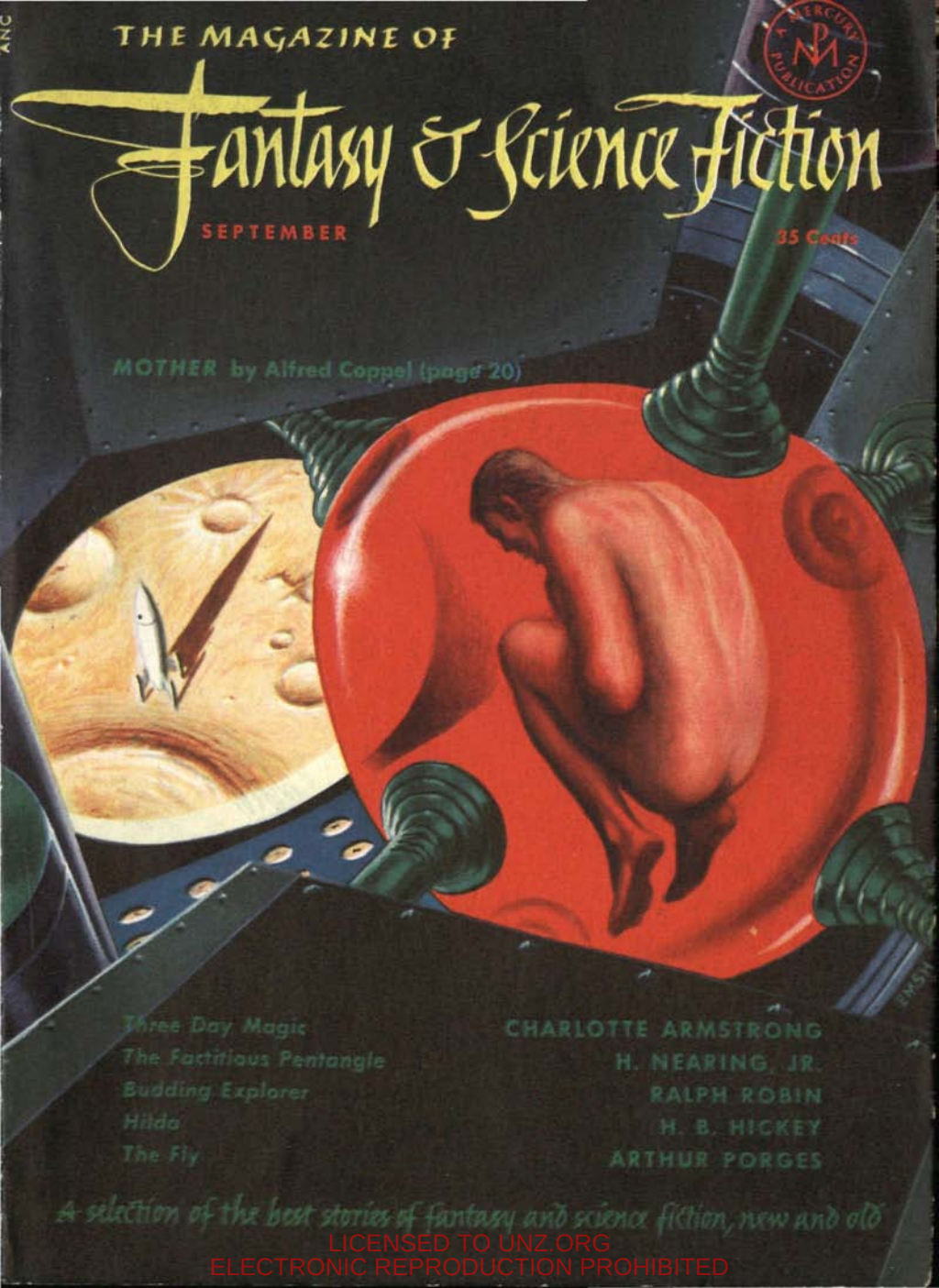
MOTHER by Alfred Coppel (page 20)



Three Day Magic — CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG
The Factitious Pentangle — H. NEARING, JR.
Budding Explorer — RALPH ROBIN
Hilda — H. B. HICKEY
The Fly — ARTHUR PORGES

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old

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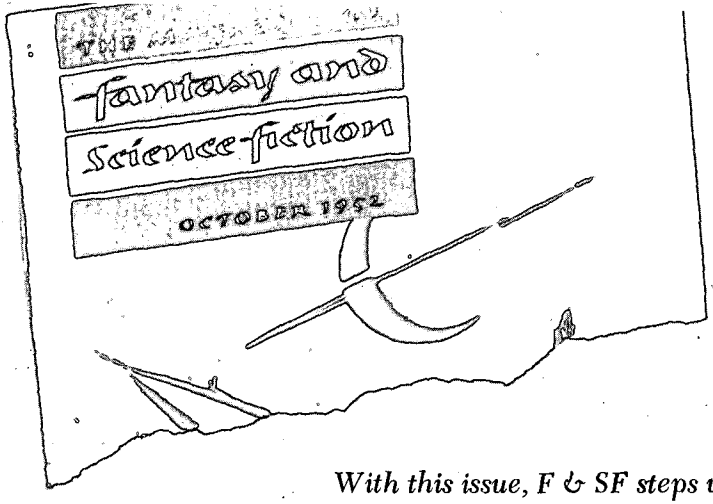

With this issue, F & SF steps up from bi-monthly to monthly publication, and thus we achieve the goal that was bright before us when we commenced publication as a quarterly in 1949. Of course, we are well aware that all of this has been possible solely because of the fine support you readers have accorded us from the beginning, and, gratefully, we'll continue our efforts to please you—redouble them, in fact! In line with this policy, we intend to increase the proportion of science fiction, as many of you have requested. Another change we hope you will approve is the new lettering and presentation of the title (as shown above) that George Salter has designed for us. You'll see it on the newsstands next month, and we think you'll find it easier to read and recognize. If you have any other suggestions, or any complaints, let us know—we want to hear them! We can be reached anytime at 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, California.

ANTHONY BOUCHER J. FRANCIS MC COMAS

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Cover by Emsh (from "Mother," by Alfred Coppel)

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Ralph Robin made his F&SF debut with a grisly little item entitled The Beach Thing *(June 1952), in which he handled an essentially terrible theme with polished wit and style. Now, in this first of his (we hope) many reappearances in these pages, Mr. Robin gives his wit full rein, unchecked by any undercurrents of horror. You may happen along the way to discern some neatly acute comments on the political system and mating habits of* Homo sapiens Americanus; *but these acuities merely heighten the absurdity of what we think is one of the funniest of all treatments of the Interstellar Cultural Explorer.*

Budding Explorer

by RALPH ROBIN

THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS at the College of Natural and Moral Philosophy on the planet Keelee didn't have too much trouble making Yeevee the Explorer look like a man. An ordinary medical examination, or an autopsy for that matter, wouldn't have given him away. But an assay of praseodymium would have been extremely interesting to any human biologist.

Wearing a three-button gray suit and a tie with vertical stripes, Yeevee materialized in a middle-sized city of the political subdivision of earth called the United States of America. It was the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, and he immediately began to shiver.

"I shall give Seequee the Outfitter a piece of my mind," he said to himself, thinking in the local language. "He should have included an overcoat and a hat. Oh well, it is not as bad as the time he sent me to that planet without any lubricant for my pseudopods."

He looked at the hurrying people in their warm coats. The legs of the females, however, were covered with only a thin mesh. To Yeevee the Explorer, looking through a man's eyes, some of the legs were aesthetically pleasing, but the almost bare skin made him shiver more.

He saw men's overcoats in a store window across the street. Seequee the Outfitter had given him plenty of money, but time was short and he had two investigations to complete. It had not been fair of the College to assign both of them to him, Yeevee thought.

He looked at his watch. It was 2:17 local time — 17 minutes since he had dematerialized on Keelee. Owing to manifold technological difficulties arising from the chemical compositions of the diverse organisms concerned,

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six hours was the maximum safe period of transmorphism in this particular case, and Yeevee would automatically dematerialize at 8:00 P.M.

He remembered Gleeglee the Encyclopedist's work, *Vehicular Control among Rudimentary Civilizations of Lower Species*, and he waited until light with a wave length of 505 millimicrons flashed before he crossed the street. He went through the revolving door of the department store, occupying the same quadrant as a young female. There wasn't much room, and the young female seemed to press herself together, perhaps out of courtesy. "Here is a chance to start my secondary investigation," Yeevee thought. "This is said to arouse the interest of young females."

The young female stepped on his toe.

Yeevee limped to the elevator. He said his first words aloud on earth when he talked to the clothing salesman. The salesman accepted him casually, and Yeevee was pleased. The Keeleean linguists had done a good job.

Trying on a gray gabardine, Yeevee started his primary investigation. He asked the salesman, "Who, in your opinion, is going to be elected president today?"

The salesman laughed, in an embarrassed way. "That's kind of a tough one to ask a salesman," he said. "Wouldn't want to give a customer the wrong answer."

"I am not a citizen of this country, so you may speak freely. Will it be Ferris or Nicholson?"

"Well, I think Bob Ferris is likely to win." The salesman still seemed reluctant to talk.

"Is that just your prediction, or are you personally in favor of the Democrats?"

"I'm for Ferris, all right . . . It fits very nicely in the back, sir."

"Tell me," Yeevee persisted, "what are your reasons for supporting Ferris?"

"My wife's hot for Nicholson," the salesman said.

Yeevee bought the gabardine coat, and looked at his watch. It was already 2:50. The moral philosophers could say easily enough: "Investigate an election among an aggregation that has made the democratic cultural adjustment — oh yes, and while you are there look into their mating patterns. Our colleagues on the natural side want something on that, and after all we are dependent on them for the mechanics."

At least he did not have to spend his time collecting facts as early explorers had had to do. Psychophysical techniques of remote observation gave the Keeleeans all the *facts* they wanted, but because the Keeleeans were very learned they knew that nothing could take the place of personal

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observation to give the actual *feeling* of a planet or a species or a culture.

And because they were very learned the Keeleeans were afraid of becoming static. So they studied the habits of other thinking species of the universe and were willing to adopt biological or cultural adjustments from the most primitive sources. For example, the Keeleeans, who during most of their history had been a humorless lot, had learned the meaning of a joke from the Glatt't, a fun-loving aquatic plant of only moderate intelligence.

Yeevee went to the hat department and quickly bought a light-gray hat with a snap brim. He left the store and hailed a taxi. Considering himself to be one of Keelee's most original explorers, he did not ask the driver's opinion of the election. He got out of the taxi at a polling place he had chosen for the cross section of voters in the precinct.

The polling place was a display room with a plate-glass front. Yeevee stood on the sidewalk and watched adult specimens of both sexes go in and out of the curtained booths where they registered their votes on machines. Yeevee was struck by the dedicated expression that came to the face of each voter as he entered his booth and closed his curtain. These voters were not like the clothing salesman. Even a surly, unshaven, moronic face seemed to glow with new purpose and duty . . .

Yeevee stopped this man as he came out of the polling place. He was wearing a big Nicholson button. "Tell me, my friend," Yeevee said, "why are you for Nicholson?"

"The Democrat cops run me in for drunk and disorderly," the citizen replied. "The Democrats are wrecking this country, brother."

Yeevee the Explorer, in his gray suit and his gray gabardine overcoat and his gray hat with the snap brim, smiling as though he had been a toothed mammalian all the days of his life, questioned other voters. Most of them talked freely, but quite a few told him to go to hell or lectured him about the secret ballot or suggested they might punch his nose for not minding his own business.

He hoped that nobody would punch his nose. He had a complete set of pain nerves, and he knew what pain felt like from one bad experience he had had only twenty or thirty light-years away.

Many of the voters were basing their votes on principle — for instance, a woman who looked like a pleasant housewife. "For whom are you voting?" Yeevee asked her.

"Robert K. Ferris!"

"And why are you voting for Ferris?"

"Well, he's a decent sort. I'd hardly vote for Nicholson." Her face twisted with high-principled hatred. "That reactionary could watch people starve without batting an eye. It would probably just give him a bigger appetite."

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Then there was the tall gentleman with the face at once dignified and benign. Yeevee stopped him as he left the polling place.

"If you will excuse me, sir," Yeevee said, "I am from a distant country and this is the first time I have been in the United States during an election. To satisfy my intellectual curiosity, may I ask — if it would not be impertinent — what is your profession and for whom did you vote?"

This voter said: "I am a mathematician, sir, and I have also —" he smiled slightly "— played with history a bit, and one or two of my historical works have been rather well received. I voted for Luther Nicholson, needless to say."

"Needless to say?"

"You don't think I'd vote for Ferris, do you?" His face lost its dignity, lost its benignity, turned red and shook. "The radical policies of that hag-ridden, lean scoundrel would ruin this country. It's treason. He's a traitor, that's what he is."

Yeevee sighed. A fun-loving Glatt't might have been amused, but Yeevee had spent only two weeks at the Glatt't School of Pure and Applied Humor.

The mathematician was the last voter he interviewed. His attention was attracted by an argument between two men, one wearing a badge reading REPUBLICAN WORKER and the other wearing a badge reading DEMOCRATIC WORKER. They were large specimens with well-developed lungs, vocal cords, and muscles.

"I'll punch you in the nose."

"I'll punch *you* in the nose."

Nose-punching was evidently popular here.

"I'm just trying to be reasonable," the Democrat said. "If he's not your guy nebbing into this precinct, who is he then? Democrats don't dress like that."

"Hoodlums working for city machines do. I've seen them in the movies."

"I'm a hoodlum working for a city machine and I don't dress like that. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll punch *him* in the nose. That'll show who *his* friends are."

"I'll show you how I feel about it," the Republican said. "I'll punch him in the nose first. I'll put a stop to his monkey-business, whatever it is. I'll teach him respect for Democratic — I mean Republican — practices."

At this point Yeevee realized that they were talking about him. "It is College policy to avoid trouble," Yeevee said to himself, and on his human legs he started very quickly to carry away his human nose.

He ran down the street with the precinct workers close behind him. Although Yeevee considered himself one of Keelee's most original explorers, with a certain lack of originality he sidestepped into a doorway. The door

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was unlocked — he should have locked it from the inside, but he hadn't studied locks — and he ran up steps. On the second-floor landing he knocked wildly on a door and someone yelled, "Come in."

Inside, Yeevee was still breathing fast. His first impression was of a room overstuffed with overstuffed chairs. File cabinets were incongruously among the chairs, and a man with much white hair was sitting at a card table. An aesthetically pleasing face peeked around a filing cabinet. Yeevee, relieved, did not hear feet pounding up the stairs.

The white-haired man tried to rise but the table started to spill books and papers, so he gave up. "Have you had the pleasure of meeting me?" he asked.

Yeevee shook his head.

"I'm Dan Roudabush. This is my secretary Phyllis. She lives here. You're altogether wrong. My wife lives here too when she isn't visiting our married son, who is a fool. I write essays."

Phyllis rolled her stenographer's chair from behind the filing cabinet. She was aesthetically pleasing in her entirety, and nubile.

"How do you do?" Yeevee said.

"Ask him who he is and what he wants," Phyllis said.

"Who are you and what do you want?" the essayist asked cheerfully.

Yeevee decided that this was a good place to get on with his chores. He said: "I am Yeevee the Explorer from the planet Keelee. I am investigating an election among an aggregation of *Homo sapiens* that has made a democratic cultural adjustment, and I am also looking into the mating patterns of the species." Now he was being original, Yeevee thought; he wondered how it would work.

"I think we ought to talk to him, Rowdy," Phyllis said. "He's probably from one of those radio programs, and we'll get platinum watches or chests of silver or something."

"Well, I've never noticed that we lack spoons, and I've refused to own a watch or a clock since I was twenty-one," Mr. Roudabush said, "but you know I talk to everyone, my dear. Sit down, Mr. Yeevee. What do you want to talk about first: the election or the mating patterns?"

Yeevee hesitated. Then he said: "The election. I am amazed, Mr. Roudabush, how your citizens decide their votes. Whim. Spite. Prejudice." He told about the voters he had talked with. "I doubt now," Yeevee concluded, "whether your species is sufficiently rational for democracy."

Mr. Roudabush listened carefully, his white head in his hands, his elbows among the books and papers. "Mr. Yeevee," he said, "it is precisely because we are irrational as a species that democracy is possible. If a politician is to get enough of our irrational votes to make him an important figure, he

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must be flexible and tolerant — without strong, fixed views. By nature such leaders can govern only by compromise and improvisation."

"Our moral philosophers say that's the best way to govern," Yeevee said.

"Ours don't, but ours are wrong. Take Ferris and Nicholson, the presidential candidates. Ferris is no traitor and Nicholson wouldn't let people starve. Ferris isn't even particularly skinny, and Nicholson isn't very fat. The cartoonists have just conventionalized them that way. They are both shrewd, conscientious — even kindly — men, who mean to do their flexible best for their country. Their rather tenuous opinions, I am convinced, are almost identical."

"But you might pick more capable leaders if you were rational," Yeevee suggested.

"Oh, no, my friend from Keelee — I accept your non-human origin, although Phyllis is looking you over as if you were a young *man* —"

"Stop it, Rowdy!"

"— if we were rational we would pick as our leaders consistent men pledged to most probable hypotheses, who would lead us down single paths to improbable but inevitable ruin."

"That is what happened to the flying Lals," Yeevee admitted.

"Lals?"

"A rational race of nitrogen dioxide breathers with biological buoyancy sacs. I doubt if you have met any."

"They haven't had the pleasure," Mr. Roudabush said.

"I'm getting hungry," Phyllis said. "Invite Mr. Yeevee to supper."

"Will you stay to supper?"

"Tell him I'm cooking," Phyllis said.

"Phyllis is cooking," Mr. Roudabush said.

"Delighted," Yeevee said.

"But she can cook only one dish — cheese soufflé. We've had it every night since my wife has been away. Not that it isn't good cheese soufflé."

Phyllis went to the kitchen to beat eggs, and Mr. Roudabush talked politics. Phyllis changed the card table from a desk to a dining table, and Mr. Roudabush talked politics. They ate, and Mr. Roudabush talked politics. Now Mr. Roudabush was a very interesting talker, and Yeevee was grateful to Mr. Roudabush for helping him get the *feeling* of a democratic election — but Yeevee wanted to proceed with his secondary investigation.

Once Yeevee managed to say, "This cheese soufflé is delicious."

Phyllis said, "Rowdy, I think Mr. Yeevee is very nice."

Mr. Roudabush said, "The trouble with all schemes of proportional representation is . . ."

Yeevee, trying to look interested, noticed that Phyllis's eyes reflected

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light with a wave length of 478 millimicrons. He glanced unhappily at his watch. The time was 6:33. He had only 87 minutes left.

Twenty of those minutes passed. Mr. Roudabush finished his coffee and a sentence and moved to an overstuffed chair. "I suppose you want to talk about the mating patterns of the species," he said. "To begin with, let me say that *Homo sapiens*, unlike practically all other mammals, does not exhibit specific seasonal or cyclical variation in its procreative drive, unless certain rather subjective evidence is admitted —"

Yeevee interrupted him. "Excuse me. Let us return to politics for a moment. There is one more thing I should like to know. How did you decide which way to vote today, since you hold that both sides are closely similar and that either will govern reasonably well?"

"Not reasonably well," Mr. Roudabush said, "unreasonably well." Then he said what Yeevee was hoping he would say: "I didn't vote, although I keep my registration up in case there should ever be a fundamental issue at stake. Since I myself am a rational man — the only one I have ever known — I had no way of choosing between the candidates."

"But isn't it your duty as a rational man to behave irrationally on election day in order to contribute to the democratic adjustment?"

Mr. Roudabush stiffened. "By heaven, you're right! What time is it?"

"The time is 7:04," Yeevee said.

"There will probably be a line," the essayist cried. He jumped up and pulled a coat from the closet. "Who would I vote for if I were irrational?"

He ran out of the apartment before either Yeevee or Phyllis could answer.

Yeevee had 53 minutes. It was a good thing that Phyllis thought he was nice. He turned to her and opened his arms.

Phyllis addressed her first direct remark to him. "I don't believe you're in radio at all, Mr. Yeevee. I am afraid that you're involved in a racket." She looked very grave and sweet.

"If 'racket' denotes, as I think it does, an illegal method of earning a living, I am involved in none," Yeevee the Explorer said simply. "My only aim is to love you and to be loved by you. It was love at first sight when I saw your pretty face peeking around the filing cabinet. So long as it is given to me to be on earth, I shall be yours."

"Those words penetrate to my trusting heart and break down the barriers of my suspicion," Phyllis said, and Yeevee's arms — which he had kept open for that purpose — closed around her. "I don't care who you are," Phyllis said.

"I care not who I am, either, if you love me," Yeevee said, "as I love you."

"I love you," Phyllis said. "It was love at first sight for me too."

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"You are the only girl I have ever loved," Yeevee said. He kissed her.

"Wouldn't we be more comfortable, dear Phyllis, in — in one of the other rooms?" Yeevee said. "It is crowded here, and there are only chairs . . ."

"Please don't be impatient," Phyllis said.

"But this minute — this minute of all minutes — we must grasp in resolute hands and from it we must wring the full measure of bliss."

"There's a very comfortable bed in my room," Phyllis said. "But I don't mean to do anything . . . except snuggle . . ."

"You are delightful," Yeevee said, enraptured. By the time they had made themselves more comfortable for snuggling in accordance with the mating patterns of the species, there were just 32 minutes left by Yeevee's watch, which he kept on.

"Just because we're this way," Phyllis said, "doesn't mean —"

Yeevee kissed her, and there were 29 minutes left. The telephone rang.

"You're not going to answer!"

"I have to. Secretaries always answer telephones." She wriggled free.

Yeevee only stared at his watch.

After a few important minutes, Phyllis came back and stood at the door. "It was Rowdy. He was calling from a pay phone at the polling place. He said when he gave his address a couple of ward heelers wanted to know if he knew someone that sounds like you, from the description. He said their grievance wasn't clear, but they'd had a few drinks and it seems that you're either a Republican goon or a Democratic goon and they're going to hunt you up after the polls close and punch you in the nose."

"What time do the polls close?" Yeevee asked.

"Eight o'clock."

"I'll punch both their noses!" Yeevee said.

"I love brave men," Phyllis said.

"Come to my arms," said Yeevee, one of Keelee's most original explorers.

There were nineteen minutes left and Yeevee kissed her again and there should have been fifteen minutes left, sufficient time in which to complete his secondary investigation. But to his surprise, Yeevee dematerialized.

The transspatial process was always unpleasant, not to speak of the incipient transmorphism, which was worse; but Yeevee was too angry to think of his discomfort. He thought of Seequee the Outfitter and what he was going to do to that contemptible neoplasm.

Since the travel mechanism was accurate to a millisecond, there was only one possible explanation. Seequee had given him a slow watch. Yeevee was thinking in Keeleean now. "Veemee greequeebee deeneetee llee," he said to himself — which means, "It would have been a lot more fun than budding."

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Mr. Hickey seems very knowledgeable about the behavior of robots. Here he offers a plausible twist on what have become, by now, their traditional qualities. It's all very reasonable, even to the unique fate of a gigolo of the future!

Hilda

by H. B. HICKEY

"Mmmm," said Mrs. Williams. "Kiss me again."

"Mmmm," said Roger. He kissed her again.

Stupid woman, he thought. Old enough, if not attractive enough, to be his mother. But rich. Mrs. Williams, Roger thought, could be worked for plenty.

They were on the balcony off Roger's bedroom. In the night sky rockets traced paths of fire on their way to the Moon and Mars. Roger's shirt was open to the third button and Mrs. Williams was pressed tight against his broad, tanned chest.

"Ohhh," said Mrs. Williams. She was completely limp. "You're so strong, Roger. When you squeeze me like this it hurts."

"The strength of my desire," Roger said. He squeezed harder.

She was now in the bag, Roger knew from many such experiences, and good for anything from jewelled cuff links to an investment in a play starring Roger. A dozen women had made that same investment, but the only lines Roger had ever memorized were those of his lovemaking routine.

"You're hurting me," Mrs. Williams gasped.

"I can't help myself," said Roger, and squeezed her even harder, deliberately.

The door of his bedroom burst open and a man rushed in. He was middle-aged and he had a paunch and he was the chairman of the board of Tri-Planet Mining, with assets of over ten million.

He was also Mr. Williams.

"You skunk!" he shouted. "You dirty, wife-stealing—" He waved a gun at Roger.

"James!" shrieked Mrs. Williams.

"Hilda!" shouted Roger.

Something big and shiny, with arms of chrome steel and an alloy middle, came storming into the room. It took the gun away from Mr. Williams and

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tucked him under one arm. It scooped up Mrs. Williams, who had rushed to her husband's aid, and tucked her under the other arm.

It carried them from the apartment and slammed the door behind them.

"I will make you coffee," Hilda said metallically. "I will make you Swedish meatballs."

"Damn!" Roger cursed. He held up his cupped palm in a dramatic gesture. "I had her, damn it!"

"No food," said Hilda.

"Who said anything about no food?" Roger demanded.

Hilda marched toward the kitchen with measured tread. Over her shoulder she said, "The man was here for the rent today."

Roger cursed landlords in general and this one in particular. "What did you tell him?"

"You were not at home."

Hilda had paused and was regarding Roger with glowing plastic eyes. He tried to look melancholy.

"Hilda," he said, "we are broke."

"Broke," said Hilda. She had been through this before.

"It hurts me to ask this of you, Hilda. But there's a factory I know of, a place where they use leased robots —"

"A factory."

"Yes. Honestly, Hilda, it'll only be for a while. I know you need new rheostats and you haven't had a pressure check in a year —" He patted her shoulder. "Say you'll take the job."

"I will take the job," Hilda said. "I will make Swedish meatballs." She clumped into the kitchen.

What he would have done without Hilda, Roger didn't know. He hated to think about it, even. You couldn't get another one like her for love or money.

She was definitely a female robot, smaller than the all-purpose kind, with real domestic aptitudes built in. She was a fine cook, an excellent laundress, and she had a woman's memory for trivia.

Hilda had been built by a Swedish firm for its president, and Roger had got her from the president's widow. What had become of the widow afterward, Roger was not sure. Maybe she'd made good her threat to commit suicide.

One thing about Hilda, Roger thought. She'd never commit suicide. And no matter how often he took advantage of her she'd never threaten him with harm; the only emotion a robot could have was love for its owner.

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"More coffee, Hilda," Roger said, downing the last of the meatballs. He felt much better. "And press my flannels. I'm going out."

It was a bad night. The only likely woman Roger ran across was with her husband, who watched her closely. And recurring thoughts of the Williams fiasco made Roger drink too much. He came home with a headache.

Hilda was already setting the table for breakfast. "A woman called."

Roger's nostrils flared. "Who was it?"

"Alice," she said.

"Hell," he said disgustedly. Alice Carter was only eighteen and wouldn't have a dollar of her own for years. And the young ones were so easy he couldn't even feel he was keeping his hand in.

"She cried," Hilda said.

"They always cry."

He bit into a piece of toast that was done exactly to his taste and picked up the facsimile newspaper Hilda had laid beside his plate.

He said, "Oh, oh."

Mr. and Mrs. James Williams had crashed in their helicopter. A 'copter control tower had overheard snatches of argument between them and Mr. Williams had forgotten to set his automatic altitude controls. Mrs. Williams was in serious condition. "Too bad they weren't killed," Roger muttered.

Or too bad it wasn't Mr. Williams who was in serious condition. With the kind of childish reasoning of which husbands were capable, he was a sure bet to blame Roger for the crash. And ten million dollars could make trouble.

"Hilda," Roger said, "I think we'll go to Paris. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Paris," Hilda said. She had been through this before too.

While she clumped off to begin packing, Roger stood and stared moodily out the window. Sometimes it seemed that no matter how hard a man tried he couldn't get a break. . . .

"Packed," Hilda said as she marched back into the living room.

Roger was sitting on the couch, his head in his hands. Hilda regarded him. "Packed," she said again.

"In a minute," Roger said. "I've got an awful headache."

"I will bring headache pills."

She clumped to the bathroom and clumped back, bearing the pills and a glass of water. After Roger had swallowed the pills Hilda brought the brandy from the sideboard and poured him a stiff drink.

"I will make more coffee," she said.

It was really wonderful, Roger thought, the way Hilda knew exactly what to do. Once she learned a routine she never forgot it.

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Suddenly Roger felt much better. The brandy was warming his stomach and making his head swim. He ran after Hilda and flung his arms around her alloy middle and hugged her.

"Hilda," he said. "You're wonderful! I love you!"

"You only say that."

"No, I mean it. Honestly."

"Kiss me," Hilda said.

It was so vaguely familiar it puzzled him, and yet so funny he had to laugh. And because the brandy was making him feel so good he actually did plant a kiss on Hilda's face-plate.

"Mmmm," said Hilda. "Kiss me again."

"Hilda! Where did you ever learn such things?"

"I listened."

So that was why the routine seemed so familiar. What a robot!

"Hilda," Roger laughed, "there's nobody in the world like you." His laughter took on a twinge of pain. "Hilda! You forget those arms are steel. When you squeeze me like this it hurts."

"The strength of my desire," Hilda said metallically.

"You're hurting me!"

"I can't help myself," said Hilda. She squeezed harder.

Roger went limp in her arms. She let him go and he fell to the floor. He made a sound in his throat and blood ran from his nose. Then the sound stopped and the blood stopped too.

Hilda marched to the closet and got the cleaning things and wiped up the spots on the rug. She lifted Roger and laid him on the couch.

She put the cleaning things back and clumped to the kitchen.

"I will make you coffee," Hilda said.

Coming . . . *in our next issue (on sale in mid-September):*

Two wondrous specimens of humorous fantasy: *Unpleasantness At Bludleigh Court,* by P. G. Wodehouse, a wholly irreverent and hilarious account of how one of Mr. Mulliner's multitudinous nephews met up with a situation dear to the hearts of psychical research societies. And another of those things that can happen only at Gavagan's Bar is cheerfully narrated by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt in *The Black Ball.*

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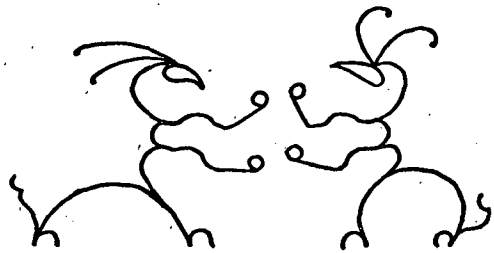

F&SF had the distinguished privilege last December of presenting for the first time in a non-technical journal the significant researches currently being conducted into the nature of Ganymedeus sapiens. *We are now honored to bring you a further report on the latest developments.*

Ganymedeus Sapiens: Modern Scientific Dilemma

A DISCUSSION OF DEVELOPMENTS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS SEQUENTIAL TO THE DISCOVERY OF A PARADIMENSIONAL SPECIES

by KENNETH R. DEARDORF

PHYSICAL TECHNIQUES for developing communication with the neapdimensional spaces which constitute the habitat of *Ganymedeus sapiens* have not kept pace with the aroused interest of scientists and scholars in the teleomorphology and ecology of this provocative species. Since the initial report bringing Ganymedeus to the attention of the scientific world[1], eminent authorities in widely divergent fields have contributed their skills to the task of resolving the mysteries of skiametric phenomena.

As noted in that report, classification was a major problem. The difficulties of nomenclature are evidenced, for example, by Figure I, which has variously been identified as "prima donna," "mother-in-law," and "Ganymedean WAC sergeant." While possible, it is extremely doubtful

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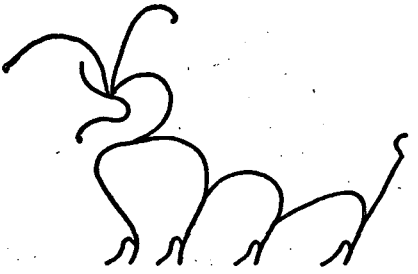
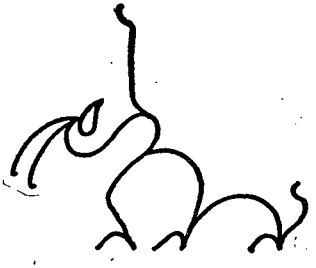
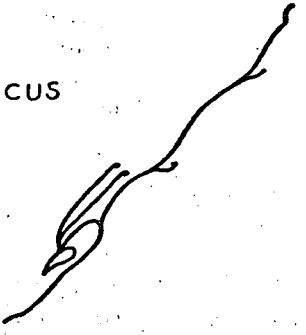


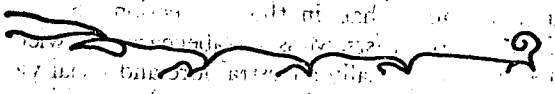
I. Ganymedeus matriarchas



II. Ganymedeus athleticus



III. Ganymedeus dytes



IV. Ganymedeus inquisitivis

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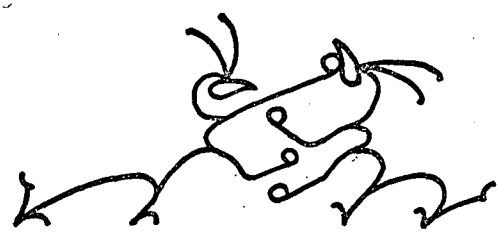

that all can be correct. Ordinarily, however, little doubt exists as to the particular activity or emotional element being displayed. The weightlifter (Figure II) and the diver (Figure III) leave little room for controversy, although the former's equipment is necessarily not demonstrable due to limitations of the scanner circuit[2]. One entire session was devoted to repeated attempts to evade the inquisitive character depicted in Figure IV, which incessantly recurred despite efforts to apperceive other forms. Assuming this individual to be actually conscious of the scanner's scrutiny, the inference is obviously highly significant. Reverse attempts at communication may well be a subsequent step. In any case, the evasion tactics were productive in themselves of results of the greatest purport, for, in the process, both an anterior and a posterior view were accidentally recovered (Figures V and VI), furnishing heretofore unknown and crucial data. Many months of study will be necessary before these two views can be properly analyzed and correlated with other facts[3].

It is an accepted axiom that the skiagram reflects merely a fragment of a whole entity. This has led to attempts at deducing the complete form. The eminent mathematician, Bjergstein, has found in the differential calculus a clue to the possible teleomorph of *Ganymedeus*. He likens the skiametric profile to the evolute of a cycloid occasioned by a quasi-ellipsoid body traversing asymmetrically but purposefully the surface of a cone. The skiagrams themselves he calls "spoor," since he postulates these to be but the tracks of *Ganymedeus*, not representations of an actual physical form[4]. This has been accepted as satisfactorily explaining the tri-archite construction of the profiles, although inadequately considering such things as the "capitate body," "antennae," and other appendages.

Tracks, of course, are undeniably expressive of their originators. It is not surprising, therefore, that, in this connection, the researches undertaken by the Cherokee scientists, Messrs. Nabeena and Nawichihoo-hay, who have brought to bear a typically ancestral lore and racial viewpoint, are among the most intriguing to date. The spoor-maker in this instance (they write) might readily be a structure of almost infinite complexity, quite capable of

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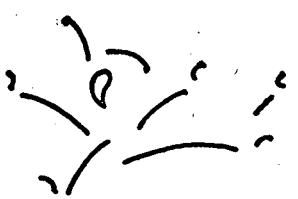
V. Vue de l'avant *

VI. Vue de l'arrière *

*After Chevalier



VII. Ganymedeus hystericus

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imprinting patterns interpretable as "antennae," "pedal and caudal extremities," *et cetera*. We must read (they say) the record of the trail[5].

Finally, that *Ganymedeus* is not unaffected by environmental and emotional stresses isophanogeric to those afflicting present-day *Homo sapiens* is illustrated by the skiagram (Figure VII) depicting the parts of a normal Ganymedean, but in a highly disjointed and separated condition. It was deduced that this Ganymedean had "gone to pieces."[6]

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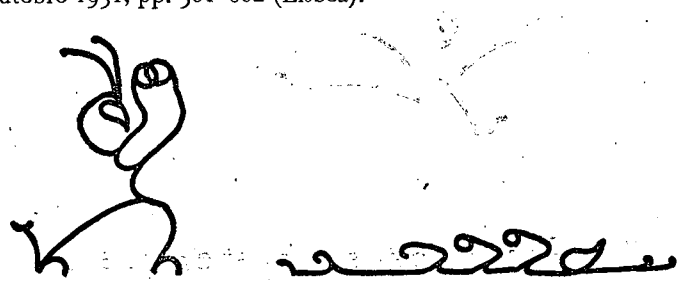

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In thinking about space travel, Alfred Coppel does not concern himself with the ships that will span the void but with the men who will be borne across the gulf. And rightly so. The ships will soon be built but what about their crews? Can the psyche of man stand up against the awfulness of leaving gravity, atmosphere, land, sea and sky all behind for . . . what? In his The Dreamer *(F&SF, April 1952) Mr. Coppel brilliantly argued one phase of the over-all psychological problem inherent in space travel. Now, with equally keen perception, he states another question, a psychological problem that must be solved before the first moon rocket take-off.*

Mother

by ALFRED COPPEL

IT WAS LIKE being in a womb, Kier thought; warm and dark and fluid. One didn't hear the banshee shrieking of the jet or the metronomic ticking of the timer. One didn't feel the zero cold that pressed against the hull. One drowsed in darkness and caressing comfort, moulded in resilient plastic, fed air and water and nourishment by tubes that bound him to the ship as a fetus is bound to a pregnant woman.

I can look outside if I choose, he thought. I can look out into the black sky and see the stars burning like beacons in the night. I can see the earth and moon as no man has ever seen them before. But he did none of these things. He lay in the warm darkness and let the ship comfort him.

They had made the ship so — the scientists and the surgeons and the psychologists. They were clever men, learned men. And though Kier was the most fit of many thousands, they knew that no man could live and be sane in space without the warmth, the darkness, the feeling of safety.

For Kier they made a mother. A metal mother shaped like a projectile and pointed at the sky. They bound him to that mother so that he could step forth — so that he could be born — when she carried him across the gulf.

Gulf. Compared to the distances between the stars, it was no gulf. And yet for a single man — the first — it was a chasm laden with the madness of loneliness, the terror of the unknown.

Kier stirred within the ship's womb. He remembered the time before the

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launching, and the things that were said. They came back to him like evanescent memories of another life.

"— *the hope of mankind rides with you. It is now or never. Our enemies have tried and failed to put a living man on the surface of the moon. They will not try again. They dare not. All their resources must now be used for the production of weapons of proven worth. Bombs. Ships. Tanks. Planes. So now it is our turn. Where they failed, we must succeed. One chance, Kier. One chance only. We cannot risk diverting a single erg more of energy in the direction of the sky.*"

Life had been bleak, Kier remembered, in that other life. People, crowding, shoving, fighting their way through the days. Food had been hard to get. Eating it had been a sickening process. Monotonous regulation had been a way of life. And then, the fear. He remembered living with fear. Fear of death from the sky, from the sea, from the land and the trillions of swarming vermin that infested it. Germs, beasts, men.

Danger. That, he recalled vaguely, had been the watchword. Danger was everywhere.

Except here. Here, the plastic womb embraced him, the tubes fed him, the ship protected him.

Time passed in an endless, formless limbo for Kier. He lay curled in the belly of the ship as the machines about him performed their appointed tasks.

The transmitter spoke into space and the radar watch at home traced the signal's progress. The cameras built into the skin of the ship recorded what they saw. The night and the stars and the sun and earth and nearing moon. The counters recorded the cosmic rays, and the meters measured the boiling life within the atomic pile that drove the ship.

Kier dreamed.

Strange, searching dreams.

"— *why did the enemy fail? Their craft was so much like Kier's — and yet they failed. The ship landed safely. But no man emerged. The enemy ship still stood like a silver tower on the pumice floor of the Sea of Serenity. Fear again? No, there was nothing to fear. There was no danger here in the warm darkness —*"

It seemed to Kier that the ship spoke to him, soothing away his doubts, keeping the nameless terrors at bay.

The ship turned. It pointed its finned tail at the moon. Beneath it, the jagged mountain ranges and barren pumice plains lay silent, taking no note of the needle of flame that descended from the starry sky to disturb their millennial slumber.

The ship carried Kier down on a pillar of fire, a column of soundless, lonely fury.

The ship landed.

The atomic fire from the jet flickered and died. The transmitter spoke

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again to the radar watch across the gulf. The ship settled into the pumice dust and waited.

Kier felt the landing dreamily. He had no thought but one of petulant annoyance. A voice was speaking into his ear. A strange, half-remembered voice from faraway.

"*Kier, this is White Sands — do you read us?*"

He tried to shut his ears, but the voice was insistent, insinuating.

"*Hello Moon Rocket! Kier! Do you hear me?*"

Kier tried to burrow himself deeper into the soft, protecting plastic that surrounded him. That hateful voice was wakening memories.

And fears.

From the other life. The life he had lived before they had taken him and put him into the womb of the perfect, comforting ship that protected him from the dark of space and the danger and the loneliness . . .

Not only of space. Of everything.

The ship was perfect, as the enemy ship had been perfect.

It protected.

The voice faded away.

The ship stopped transmitting. With precise cybernetic pragmatism it discovered the thing that was causing Kier anxiety.

Kier thought.

I will not *be born!*

"*Kier, this is White Sands! The flight is over, Kier. You can — You must —*"

The voice faded away again. This time for good. Kier relaxed in the warm darkness of the womb, filled with a formless pleasure. It was good not to think.

The ship understood.

Kier curled into the fœtal position in the plastic sac.

Thinking stopped.

The ship stood tall and silent on the pumice plain as the sun set very, very slowly.

Kier was content.

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This is the era, in fiction if not in fact, of The Private Eye. The private detective and consultant has an honorable and long lineage, stretching back to the prophet Daniel and advancing through Sherlock Holmes to the Continental Op and on to such noble moderns as Carney Wilde and Lew Archer. But the drab and hackneyed quality of most contemporary private eyes on radio and television, the contemptible viciousness of Mike Hammer and his pornographic colleagues in paperbound books have brought a fine profession at once into financial popularity and critical disrepute. New blood is needed — and hereby appears in the person of Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, the eminent mathematician who has also been, in his time, a cyberneticist, a basketball player and a Shakespearean actor. Now he becomes (aided of course by the invaluable MacTate) at once a private detective and a marriage counselor — an odd combination, perhaps, to us Terrans; but such are the mores of Mars, as you'll learn in one of the most absurdly hilarious episodes in the entire Ransom saga.

The Factitious Pentangle

by H. NEARING, JR.

"SUPPOSE YOU WANTED to get to Mars," said Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, of the Mathematics Faculty. "What would you do?" He stuck out his little belly and began to swing in his swivel chair.

Professor Archibald MacTate, of Philosophy, smiled with half his mouth. "I suppose I'd see my psychiatrist," he said.

"No, no." Ransom stopped swinging and waved a reproachful hand at him. "You know what I mean. How would you get there?"

"Oh. Well —" MacTate crossed his long legs, folded his arms, and regarded the ceiling thoughtfully. Then he looked at his colleague and cocked an ingratiating eyebrow. "Fourth dimension?"

"Fourth dimension." Ransom's tone was acid. He began to swing again. "Every time you ask anybody a hard question, they say 'fourth dimension.' As if that meant anything. Why don't they — ?"

"Very well." MacTate shrugged. "I give up. How would *you* get to Mars? If you wanted to?"

Ransom stopped swinging and faced him. "Now that's better. Don't

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throw some silly word around just because it sounds scientific. You can't get to Mars through a word." He aimed a finger at MacTate. "You've got to get there through — You've got to use — Well, as a matter of fact it *is* the fourth dimension. Sort of." He frowned accusingly. "But you had no way of knowing that, MacTate. You just picked a word out of —"

"I apologize, old boy." MacTate held up his hands. He looked somewhat nervously around the room. "I presume you've already worked out a fourth-dimensioner?"

Ransom nodded. "Over there." He pointed to a black box, the size of a large suitcase, that sat next to the door. "You plug that in, and the door opens on Mars."

MacTate looked at the door. "You mean you just open the door and there'll be a planet in it. Just like that?"

"No, no." Ransom waved a hand at him. "You know what I mean. It'll open on some place on Mars."

MacTate eyed the box dubiously. "What place on Mars?"

Ransom smiled. "Who was that fellow that wrote about the red and yellow towers of Helium? Edgar Allan Burroughs? Something like that. Well, maybe that's where it'll be. How do I know?" He threw his colleague a reproachful look. "My God, MacTate. Give me credit for hitting the planet."

MacTate nodded. "You're right, old boy. Congratulations. I simply supposed that you'd already been out and seen what the door opened on."

"MacTate. You think I'm crazy? How do I know Mars doesn't have a fluorine atmosphere?"

"But wouldn't the spectroscopists have — ?"

"Oh." Ransom waved contemptuously. "They don't know everything. Anyway, I'd have to get a space suit. Did you ever hear of anybody going to Mars without a space suit?"

MacTate looked at him quizzically. "The man in the Edgar Rice Burroughs stories didn't have one."

Ransom jabbed a finger at him. "That's the name. Edgar Rice Burroughs. You read those stories, MacTate? Good stories, but —" he made a face — "fantasy. How'd he get to Mars? Sent his astral body or something, didn't he?"

"Something like that." MacTate's eyes twinkled. "Is that what your machine does?"

Ransom grinned. "As a matter of fact," he said, "You won't believe this, but I go by hysteresis." He gestured vaguely toward the window. "You remember when I went over to see my nephew in New Jersey last summer? He works at that place where they dig willemite."

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"Dig what?"

"Willemite. It's a sort of silicate of zinc, with manganese and some other stuff. Comes in long crystals. Well, he had a piece of it there that wasn't like regular willemite at all. It was dark blue and sort of metallic-looking, which real willemite isn't, and under the X-rays it shone with a violet light, instead of green like the regular stuff. He couldn't figure it out, so he gave it to me to study." Ransom looked at the black box thoughtfully. "I still don't know what it is, but I found out what you can do with it. Put it through all sorts of tests. Among other things I put it in a solenoid and —"

"I thought that was a disease."

"Now, MacTate, you stop being funny. You know perfectly well what a solenoid is. You've seen an ignition coil on an atuomobile, haven't you? Lot of wires wound around an iron core?"

"Magnet, isn't it?"

"*That's* it." Ransom nodded. "Now. When you run a current through a regular solenoid to magnetize the iron inside, and then shut the current off, the iron doesn't lose its magnetism as fast as the wires lose the electricity. That's hysteresis. But this blue willemite" — he stopped swinging and aimed a finger at MacTate — "*gained* in magnetism as the current went *down*. It wasn't the *amount* of electric current that induced the magnetism, but the *change* in current. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's very interesting."

"Interesting! Listen, MacTate, it's insane. How about the law of conservation of energy, for instance? Where was all that extra magnetic energy coming from?"

MacTate looked at his colleague. He decided to take a chance. "Fourth dimension?"

"Right." Ransom jabbed a finger at him. "This time you're almost right. Look." He took a pencil and a piece of paper from the top desk drawer and drew a circle with two dots inside. "Here's the universe. This circle. Just imagine it's two-dimensional. These dots —" he pointed — "are the Earth and Mars. Now suppose you've got a line of force between them that begins to contract and pull them together." He drew a line between the dots. "Your two-dimensional universe bends through the third dimension. Right?" He folded the paper so that the two dots touched each other. "And your universe can go on expanding, or whatever it's doing, without any interference."

"But what about orbital motion? Don't the Earth and Mars move at different velocities?"

"Sure. But it just means shifting the fold in the universe. See, no matter where these two dots are, you can draw a line midway between them. The

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only difference in the case of the planets is that you've got a three-dimensional universe folding through a fourth dimension."

MacTate looked at the paper. "And you do all that with — that?" He pointed at the black box.

"Seems too little, doesn't it?" Ransom's eyes gleamed. "But it's got an enormous appetite. Eats up space-time and converts it to magnetism. Like pulling something with a rope. You trade yanks for rope-length."

"But in this case, where do the yanks come from? Doesn't there have to be a loss of something or other somewhere along the line?"

"Sure. The loss is in space-time between here and Mars. It's converted into a magnetic field in a proportion of — well, you wouldn't believe it anyway. The electric current is just a sort of catalyst."

"But doesn't that make it a perpetual-motion machine? I thought you couldn't —"

"No, no. There's other kinds of loss. Heat, escaping sub-atomic doodads, that sort of thing. But it won't give out for a long time. I figured it out by tensor calculus." Ransom smiled demurely. "You know the curvature tensor Einstein explained gravity with? Well, I worked out a folding tensor."

"But, Ransom." MacTate pointed at the drawing. "How do you know it's Mars that's on the other end of that line? How do you know it isn't —"

"The sun?" Ransom laughed. "Wouldn't that be something. But don't worry. I took care of all that in the figuring. In this tensor I worked out you've got to include energy values in the equation for finding the geodesic of the fold, and since the masses of the Earth and Mars are unique in this particular field —"

"All right, Ransom." MacTate held up his hands. "When are you going to get a space suit?"

Ransom was excited from hearing his own explanation. He looked at the black box. "MacTate. You don't think there *could* be fluorine in the atmosphere? On Mars?"

MacTate shrugged. "Old boy, I'm really in a better position to advise you concerning Hottentot epics."

"Listen." Ransom faced him. "Why don't we just plug it in for a second and take a peek. If anything's wrong, we could pull the plug right out again. Couldn't we?"

MacTate looked at the black box apprehensively. "I don't know, Ransom. I don't think I'd —"

Ransom was already at the door. He bent over and plugged the wire of the black box into a floor socket. "Oh, it won't hurt to try it for just a second. In a few minutes it'll warm up, and —"

"But good heavens, Ransom." MacTate suddenly found his mind swarm-

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ing with objections that the theoretical discussion had failed to awaken. "What will we do when Mars comes crashing down on us? What will — ?"

"Now take it easy," MacTate." Ransom waved his hands soothingly. "Look." He came back to the desk, turned the paper over and drew two dots at opposite ends of it. "Here's the Earth. Here's Mars. Now suppose the universe is two-dimensional again." He picked up the paper and rolled it into a cylinder so that the dots were superposed. "And suppose it's curved through the third dimension like this. The dots are touching, but if you were a two-dimensional character living on one of them, and light curved through the continuum represented by the cylinder, where would you *see* the other one?"

MacTate ran a finger around the cylinder. "Away off here."

"Right." Ransom pointed to the door. "The place where we're touching Mars is right there, but to everybody outside, Mars is still up in the sky."

MacTate looked at the door and nodded. Then he pursed his lips. "But if Mars is where the hall ought to be, what happened to the hall?"

"Oh, it's still out there, only —"

Suddenly the door opened a little, and a head appeared around it.

"Are you Ransom the marriage counselor?"

"See," said Ransom, "the hall's still there, only you can't —" He looked at the visitor, who had opened the door wider. "Am I what?"

The visitor stepped into the room. "This must be it, Joe," he said, without moving his lips. A companion followed him in and closed the door. They looked from Ransom to MacTate. "I say," said the first one, "are you monsters?"

MacTate stopped wondering about the hall. The visitors were tall, bug-eyed, and barrel-chested. They had slender legs and tentacled hands. Their ears, which fluttered nervously about their heads, looked rather like fleshy ferns.

"My God," said Ransom.

The first visitor was looking at MacTate. "Is this your mate?" he said.

"Wait, Connie," said the second visitor. "If they're monsters, perhaps we —"

"No, no," said Connie. "I know a triple who went to a monster physician. Very satisfactory. They have a certain — perspective sometimes." He reached for a chair and sat down, sniffing the air with distaste. "Awfully stuffy in here," he said. "And heavy. Gravity machine, no doubt." He looked at Ransom and MacTate. "I guess you work together on your cases. Let me tell you right at the start that money is no consideration. Joe and I have very good positions in the Red Tower. And we're so unhappy about Helen that if you can help us in any way at all —"

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"Yes," said Joe, who had dropped into a chair in the corner. "You must understand that this was no ordinary marriage. It was as if we had been — meant for one another." He began to sniffle and wiped away a tear.

"Joe, dear," said Connie. Joe stopped sniffling. "As Joe says," Connie went on, "it was a beautiful marriage. Purely for love, all three of us. But you never can tell what goes on in the mind of even a mate. When I found the —"

"Sometimes I think if we had had an egg right at the start, this wouldn't have happened," said Joe. He began to sniffle again.

"But we were young and fond of pleasure," said Connie, sighing. "You know how it is. Good jobs, deluxe rocket ships, jewels and parties. We were intoxicated with our youth and our romance. We wanted to live, and children were something to come later."

"If only we had known," said Joe. "Now it's all a hollow mockery." The sniffles became sobs.

"Joe, dear," said Connie. He turned back to Ransom and MacTate. "As I was saying, when we found the beard-ribbon, we couldn't believe it. It was in the garden, under —"

"And the petunias had bloomed," sobbed Joe. "Our anniversary. It was cruel, cruel." He buried his face in his tentacles.

"Joe." In Connie's tone there was a hint of impatience. Joe controlled himself. "This beard-ribbon," Connie continued, "was in the garden, and it had Helen's name on it. We knew Helen hadn't bought it, because the jewels in it — Well, we knew Helen's tastes pretty well, you know, and it simply wasn't the sort of thing —"

"Not at all the sort of thing," said Joe, looking up. "We've rather — cultivated Helen, you know. Made her tastes like ours."

"Exactly," said Connie. "Good books, good music, superior clothes and dishes. And fine jewelry. We taught Helen to appreciate them. So when we found this cheap beard-ribbon and then the night-club souvenirs and the book of erotic verses — all incredibly vulgar, you know — we knew instantly that some roving couple had begun to reawaken that strain of bad taste we had taken such pains to —"

"Yes," said Joe, "we never felt that Helen had been inevitably converted. And the nature of the evidence — jewelry, night-clubbing, love poetry, all that — it all pointed toward a couple — on the prowl, as the expression goes."

"But they're not going to get away with it." Connie's tone was suddenly ferocious. His eyes blazed for an instant, and the tentacles on his hands twined together excitedly. Then his mouth twisted into a mysterious smirk. "We care too much for Helen to let that happen."

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"So we want you to find out who this couple is," said Joe, "and we don't care too much how you go about it. So long as you get results. Stop at nothing and spare no expense. You see?"

"Yes," said Connie. "We're rather in a hurry about it. Can't let it go too far, you know. So we'll leave you now, and you can get right to work. Helen's at home. Supposed to be, that is. The address is polar coordinate five point three angle two six four." He and Joe rose to leave. "Get in touch with us there as soon as you find anything."

Suddenly Ransom found his voice. "But —"

"Oh." Connie waved a tentacle. "The retainer. Of course. We'll have our broker file an increment to your account at once. I suppose your Yellow Tower address will do." He twined a hand around Joe's arm. "We'll expect to hear from you very soon. Come, Joe." They went out and closed the door.

Ransom looked at MacTate.

MacTate looked back at him. "Martians, I presume. Garrulous sort, don't you think?"

Ransom winced. "But did you watch their mouths?" he said. "Didn't open once. For all that talking they did."

"I think it was those ferny things on their ears, old boy. Must have sent some kind of waves to our cortical cells. It seems to be a remarkable system of communication."

"They're remarkable people." Ransom began to swing in his swivel chair. "But I don't trust them." He looked at MacTate. "All that stuff they were telling us. Do you?"

"You mean their motive for worrying about Helen?"

"Yes. That Joe. Did you notice how heavy he was hamming a broken heart till what's-his-name shut him up? If he wasn't overacting a part —"

"Well —" MacTate pursed his lips. "But don't you think it's possible he's just a bit emotionally unbalanced? People of that sort do sometimes seem to be overacting when they're only —"

"All right." Ransom aimed a finger at him. "How about the way they talked to me? About this case or whatever you want to call it. Didn't it sound to you as if they thought I was a private eye? Now use your imagination. If you had a real broken heart, would you go to a detective?"

"But when they came in, they asked if you were a marriage counselor. Perhaps the two functions are merged in their society." MacTate looked at the door. "Though I wonder how they knew who you are."

"Oh, that's easy." Ransom waved a hand. "I was sitting behind the desk when they came in, so they figured it must be my office. And when they said a name, we heard it as the name *we* call me."

"But what made them think you're a marriage counselor?"

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"Well —" Ransom pointed at the door. "If the point of contiguity is a door on this side, it's possible that it's a door on the other side too. Right? Presumably there's a sign on the other one saying that Dr. Cyclops or somebody, Licensed Marriage-Counseling Detective, plies his mystery within. Only Cyclops is in the same fix as the hallway out there, because" — he jabbed a thumb into his belly — "I've got his spot in the fourth dimension." He grinned. "After a while, he'll get tired of waiting for customers and go home, because they're all getting sidetracked into here."

"And of course you realize that you're disrupting the social organization of Mars by usurping Cyclops's spot." MacTate's eyes twinkled. "Or do you really intend to go looking for Helen?"

"MacTate." Ransom looked at his colleague soberly. "What's a beard-ribbon?"

MacTate looked at the door. "You have me there, old boy. What is it?"

"How should I know? But you heard them talking about it, didn't you?"

"Yes. They said it had jewels in it, or something like that. I suppose it's a hair ribbon that's worn in the beard." MacTate started to get up. "Why don't we look out the door to see if anyone's wearing —"

"But they didn't have any beards. Joe and what's-his-name. They had faces like babies. And they said the beard-ribbon belonged to *Helen*."

"Well —" MacTate shrugged. "They seem to be trisexual. I suppose you can't expect any of their biological features to be quite comparable to ours. Though they did speak of having children. Or eggs or something."

Ransom stopped swinging and stared past MacTate's shoulder. "You know, MacTate. That's what really puzzles me about those people." He looked a little embarrassed and lowered his voice. "How do you suppose they —?"

Suddenly the door opened. Ransom and MacTate looked up. The newcomer was much like Joe and Connie, except that most of his face was obscured by a glossy black beard, tastefully intertwined with a fine sequined ribbon in which multicolored jewels sparkled at regular intervals. He came into the room and closed the door. "It says you're Ransom the detective," he said.

Ransom waved at a chair. "That's right. Sit down and tell me about it."

The visitor sat down and wiped his forehead with a cluster of tentacles. "You monsters sure do like it hot and heavy." He sniffed the air. "And stuffy. Wouldn't hurt them to spare a few eugenicists from those silly animals to adapt you. But then, you're only taxpayers, so naturally they don't worry about you."

Ransom cleared his throat. "You wished to consult me about a matter concerning the Bureau of Internal —?"

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"Don't be silly." The visitor's sneer, while not visible, distorted his tone. "You know perfectly well what I'm here about. I'm Helen."

"Helen!" Ransom eyed the beard. He had not pictured anything so luxuriant.

"Don't pretend you haven't heard all about me," said Helen. "I know Connie and Joe were here to see you."

"Well," said Ransom, "if you're here to clear up the —"

"Clear up nothing," said Helen. "If you think you're going to talk me into releasing the dowry, you're crazy. You think I don't know what they're up to?" She snorted. "I should have my head examined for getting married in the first place."

MacTate looked at her. "It seemed to me that Joe and Connie were genuinely sorry. Especially Joe. When Connie was telling —"

"Don't give me that stuff," said Helen. "Joe couldn't fool a moron with that act he puts on."

MacTate cocked an eyebrow. "Why would Joe think it necessary to put on an act?" he said. He put a cigarette into his mouth.

"Why would —" Helen stared at him. "Look. I thought you knew all about this. I still think you do. But if we're going to play games —" She twined the tentacles of both hands together and leaned back in her chair. "In the first place, they married me for my money. Or didn't they bother to tell you that? Stooped way below their class to do it, of course. The damned snobs. My old man made his money selling thoat steaks in the black market during the Warhoon war. Theirs lost their money in the ray-gun business when whoever it was fused the mercury atom. So even if I wasn't refined, I had a big enough dowry to support them in the manner to which they were accustomed. And you'd be surprised how quick I got clasped to the bosom of culture."

MacTate reached into his pocket. "But I understood your tastes had become similar to theirs." He took his hand out of his pocket and looked at Ransom. "Do you have a match?"

Ransom reached into the top desk drawer, took out a cigarette lighter and flicked it. "He's right," he said to Helen. "They seemed to think they'd worked on you enough to —"

"Sure," said Helen. "They poured culture on me, all right. The way you'd spray a bug with insecticide. And I had to play along to keep peace in the family. But don't think I was fooling them. They knew I was still a sow's ear at heart."

Ransom lit MacTate's cigarette and put the lighter on the desk. "So you went and found another couple? That you've got more in common with, I mean?"

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"Another —! Listen, do you think after — them I'd ever want to get married again?" Helen scowled. "Ransom, you *are* a monster. Everybody laughs at old maids, but there's lots of things worse than being an old maid. I wish —"

"Wait." Ransom's tone became accusing. "Joe and Connie told us you were carrying on with another couple. All the evidence pointed to it." He held up a forefinger and squeezed it with his other hand. "Cheap beard-ribbon." He squeezed another finger. "Night-club souvenirs." He squeezed a third finger. "Book of purple poems. Now where did all that stuff come from if you're not involved in a — pentangle? Joe and Connie seemed awfully disappointed to —"

"Disappointed! I'll say they were disappointed. Why," — Helen mimicked a shocked socialite — "how could they mingle me with their friends if I had such *vulgar* tastes. It was only my money that mixed good with their friends." She smiled sardonically. "So it all came out as a problem of simple division. Divide me from my money, and everything would be lovely. That's why they came to you."

"But why should they come to me about that? They didn't say a word about —"

"They didn't say anything about shadowing me, or making it worth your while to find out what I was up to? Don't give me that." Helen waved a disgusted tentacle.

"Well, if they didn't think I'd catch you with another couple, what *did* they think?"

Helen stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what did they suspect I'd catch you doing? That would be to their advantage?"

A furtive look crept into Helen's eyes. "Let's not get nosy, Ransom. You're still working for them, you know. What do you expect me to do? Just drop the fee into your lap?" She blinked her eyes and turned her head away. "Besides, you wouldn't catch me doing anything."

"By the way," said MacTate. "May I ask what did bring you here?"

"Now that's more like it." Helen leaned forward. "Let's skip the games and get down to business. First, how much did they offer you to get something on me?"

Ransom frowned reminiscently. "They didn't —"

"Hold on, old boy." MacTate held up a warning hand. He ground out his cigarette and turned to Helen. "Surely you can't expect us to give you confidential information of that nature. We have a duty to our clients to —"

"All right." Helen pointed a tentacle at him. "Whatever it is, I'll double

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it. You lay off me, and I'll pay you twice as much, twice as much."

Ransom's eyes narrowed. "Wait." He aimed a finger at Helen. "If you're not doing anything illegal, why do you want us to lay off you?"

The furtive look returned to Helen's eyes. "Why —" Her left-hand tentacles twitched nervously at the chair arm. "I just want to be left alone. All I want to do is live and let live. It's worth money to me to get you off —"

"Wait." Ransom fixed her with a prosecutor's eye. "If all you're doing is living and letting live, then where did that junk come from? The evidence, I mean. How did that cheap beard-ribbon with your name on it —?"

"Stop it." Helen clapped her tentacles over her antennae, then waved them frenziedly in the air. "You can't talk that way to me. I'm not on trial. Who do you think you are? I come in here with a business proposition, and before I know it I'm getting the third degree." Suddenly she stopped waving her arms and dropped them helplessly. "Look. You've got to help me. Stop making me lose my temper. I can explain how I got all that junk. It's — because I liked it. They kept throwing this cultural stuff at me all the time, and finally I just got sick of it and went and picked up some things *I* liked for a change. That's all."

"You got yourself the beard-ribbon?"

"Sure. I couldn't stand all that culture any more, so —"

"But why didn't you tell Connie and Joe about it? Didn't you stop to think how it would look to them when they found that stuff?"

Helen's eyes shifted. "Well, no. I — It wasn't any of their business, was it? You know what snobs they are. Can you blame me for —?"

"Helen." Ransom looked at her earnestly. "How did you get that beard-ribbon?"

Helen looked down at her nose for a moment, then sprang to her feet, came over to the desk, and pressed her tentacles firmly on the edge. "Listen here, Ransom. I don't have to answer all your silly questions. Now I'll put it to you for the last time. Do you want to make twice as much money as they'd give you, or don't you?"

"Helen," Ransom said sadly, "money doesn't mean as much to me as — Look. If you'd just take the chip off your shoulder and tell me the truth so I can decide what we ought to —"

"All right." Helen pointed a tentacle at him. "I'll tell you the truth. They're trying to get me committed. So they can get my money. How do you like that? You think that's right?"

"Committed? For what?"

Helen kicked the desk angrily. "There you go again. 'What.' 'Why.' Always questions." She waved her arms. "Look, Ransom, you're too

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damned full of friendly advice to talk sensible. When you wake up and think of the fee I'm offering you, you know where to get in touch with me." She turned and went toward the door. "Think it over." Suddenly she stumbled over the black box. "Booby traps yet." She eyed the box curiously and sniffed the ozone around it. "Perfume. Say —" Opening the door, she sniffed the air outside and then the air inside again. "No wonder you act crazy." She went out and closed the door.

Ransom stared after her. "Now I don't trust any of them." He started to swing in his swivel chair. "And the trouble is, it bothers me. I get so wrapped up in their damned pentangle, or whatever it is, that I forget to ask them all the things you'd want to ask people. On another planet."

"We're certainly finding out something about their family life." MacTate put another cigarette into his mouth. "While your clients are gone, why don't we take a look outside and see if their other institutions —" He looked at the desk top. "Where is your cigarette lighter, old boy?"

"The lighter?" Ransom glanced over the desk top. "I didn't do anything with it. Don't you have it?"

"Look in your drawer. Maybe you put it back."

"I don't —" Ransom opened the drawer and looked into it. "No." He looked up. "Wait a minute. Helen was standing over here just before he left. She, I mean. Maybe she knocked it off the desk." He looked at the floor around the desk. "Not there. Well, maybe it got caught in one of his tentacles. Her tentacles." He grinned. "We'll get it when she comes back."

MacTate raised an eyebrow. "You think she's coming back?"

"Sure. She's scared to death we'll find out how she got that beard-ribbon and the other stuff." Ransom began to swing. "I wouldn't even be surprised if she raised the ante next time."

MacTate nodded thoughtfully. "She must have quite a bit of money. Perhaps she's right about their motive for marrying her. But it's not clear to me why she married them. Did you get that?"

"Oh, I guess it was coercion by her old man, as she calls him." Ransom waved a hand. "You know. Made a lot of money and —"

"On the other hand, it might have been sexual attraction." MacTate smiled. "She's apparently fed up with them now, but who knows how Joe and Connie might strike a third sex at an impressionable age."

"You know," said Ransom, looking a little embarrassed, "as I was saying before, that's what really puzzles me about them." He lowered his voice. "How do you imagine they —?"

"Ransom!" The door had opened, and Connie and Joe came into the room. "Ransom," said Connie, "was Helen just here to see you?"

"We saw her coming out of the tower," said Joe, dropping into a chair.

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"There's absolutely no business we can think of she might have —"

"What did she want?" Connie sat down and looked at Ransom narrowly. "Does she know we suspect her? Who's she carrying on with?"

"Wait." Ransom raised a commanding hand. "Let's not get excited. We can't answer more than one question at a time, can we?" He put on an oracular expression. "Now. In the first place, you're right. About Helen being here. Left just a few minutes ago. But in the second place" — he looked at them sternly — "she says there isn't any other couple."

Joe and Connie gaped at him. "But that's ridiculous," said Joe. "You didn't actually expect her to tell you the truth, did you? How did she explain the beard-ribbon and the other things?"

"She said she bought them. She said your uplift campaign —"

"See here," said Connie. "That's an out-and-out lie. If she'd bought those things, we'd have seen the purchase records on our broker's report."

"I can't help it," said Ransom. "Isn't that what she said, MacTate? That she bought that stuff herself?"

MacTate reflected. "Well, Ransom, I'm not sure she actually said —"

The door flew open. "I *knew* you'd be here again. Thought I didn't see you sneaking into the tower, didn't you? You damned little rattlesnakes." Helen came in and banged the door. "What have you told them, Ransom? I never saw anything like it. You can't even trust a dumb monster any —"

"Listen." Ransom scowled. "Who are you calling —"

"Just a moment, old boy." MacTate looked Helen in the eye. "Helen," he said, "refresh my memory, will you? Did you or did you not tell us that you had purchased the beard-ribbon and the other items in question?"

Helen stared at him, then glanced apprehensively at Joe and Connie. "I —" Suddenly she pouted. "I don't remember what I said."

"Well. *Did* you purchase them?"

Helen looked up and glared at him. "That's none of your business. Who are you, anyway? I came here to talk to Ransom."

"All right," said Ransom. "Tell me, then. Did you buy that stuff?"

Helen looked at him indignantly for a moment. Then her eyes shifted.

"You see what we mean," said Ransom. "If you didn't buy the stuff, and it wasn't given to you, then you must have —"

"No!" Connie stood up.

"Helen!" Joe stood up too.

They looked at Helen incredulously.

"And I thought —"

"And all the time —"

"A — a klepto —" Joe could not finish the word. He gasped and sat down.

"Helen." Connie moaned and sank into his chair too.

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Helen looked at Ransom. "Ransom, I want to apologize for calling you a dumb monster. You're not half as dumb as I am. If I hadn't come here in the first place —" She turned to Joe and Connie. "All right. Go ahead and commit me. That's what you always wanted, anyway. Go ahead. You don't have to sit there like it was a wake. When you're tickled to death that —"

"Commit you!" Connie looked up. "Helen. Whatever are you thinking of? What would our friends —"

"Say!" Helen's eyes widened. "That's right." She flicked a tentacle. "What would your friends say. Of course. Why didn't I think of that?" She darted a venomous glance at her mates. "Well, now that sort of changes things a little, doesn't it?" She sat down, twined her tentacles together, and smiled malevolently. "What are you going to do about it?"

"The first thing we're going to do," said Connie, "is get you to an ethician. If you're out of your mind —"

"Watch out. Your friends might find out you're taking me."

"Not a chance. I know a very trustworthy —"

"Listen, Connie. Use your head. You think I didn't know what I was doing? I was going to give all that stuff back after —"

"That's what they all say," said Joe. "The sooner we can get you to an ethician —"

"They're right, Helen," said Ransom. "You thought they were going to commit you. You wouldn't have stolen those things if you weren't a klepto —"

"All right." Helen glared. "Just for the sake of argument, let's say you're right. What happens afterwards? Am I supposed to go back and live with them again? I tell you, I can't stand it. I'd sooner —"

"Wait." Ransom looked at Joe and Connie. "How about a separation? Would that make everybody happy? If we could draw up a settlement —"

The trio looked at him sharply. "A settlement on who?" said Helen.

"Connie," said Ranson, "how much were you paying me for this job?"

Connie looked puzzled. "I didn't —"

"Just a moment." MacTate looked at Ransom. His eyes were twinkling. "It was about 50,000, wasn't it?"

"You're lying!" Helen turned to him with blazing eyes. "That's crazy. Even with prices what they are —"

"My dear Helen," Joe said nastily, "you underestimate your value to us."

"I don't care. It's a lie. 50,000! You wouldn't —"

"Wait a minute, Helen," said Connie. "Let's hear what he has to say."

"All right." Ransom folded his hands across his belly and turned to Helen. "You said you'd double their fee if I'd lay off. So if you don't want me to tell everybody you're a kleptomaniac, you go invest 100,000 in Joe and

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Connie's name and live all by yourself just the way you want to."

"A *hundred* thousand." There was a desperate look in Helen's eyes.

"Helen, you told me it was worth a lot of money to you. Not to be annoyed. Just how much *is* peace and quiet worth to you?"

"Helen." MacTate looked at her. "If you care to have another opinion, I think I may say that you're the one we're primarily interested in helping. The way you've been talking, I'd think you'd find a separation cheap."

Helen looked at him. Then she looked at Joe and Connie. "You know," she said, "you might have something there at that." Suddenly she turned and squinted at Ransom suspiciously. "But then what's in it for you?"

Ransom leaned back in his swivel chair and waved a magnanimous hand. "Helen, your money wouldn't do me much good, anyway. I tell you what. Between your treatments at the — whatever it is they're taking you to — you show us around the city and explain everything. We're a little new in these parts, and if you'd sort of take us around —"

"Ransom." Helen stared. "I don't . . ."

"Helen, wait." Joe and Connie sprang up beside her and grabbed her.

"Don't say any more. He made an agreement."

"We're witnesses. He can't charge us now."

"If he doesn't want a fee, don't argue with him."

Ransom looked at them open-mouthed. Then he scowled. "All right. If you want to get nasty about it, suppose I go tell everybody Helen's a kleptomaniac." He jabbed a finger at [illegible]m. "You know, I think that's a good idea. I'm just damned mad enough to —"

"Listen." Helen scowled back at him. "I didn't say —"

"Don't argue with him, Helen." Joe tugged at her arm. "He can't do anything. We'll have you taken care of at the ethician's and sue him for slander if he talks."

"Yes," said Connie. "I know just the attorney to shut his mouth. Don't worry about a thing. You come with us to the ethician's now, and then we can draw up that settlement you have in mind."

They turned Helen around and pulled her to the door. "Don't answer any more of his insults," said Joe. "It's never safe to —"

As they went out, Helen broke away and stuck her head through the door. "Ransom," she said, "I'll come back to take you around, if that's what you want. After I get rid of them." She jerked a tentacle over her shoulder. "Meanwhile" — her eyes shifted — "I just want to ask you one thing." There was an odd expression on her face. "What's that paper you have on your desk?"

Ransom and MacTate looked at the diagram of the folding universe. Ransom picked it up. "This?" He laughed. "Oh, that's just a drawing I

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made. I was explaining something to MacTate here. It's a sort of drawing of the universe. You see —" He looked up. "Helen!" She was gone.

Ransom looked at MacTate. "Where did she go?"

"I don't know, old boy. I was looking at the diagram. Perhaps Joe and Connie got tired of waiting."

Ransom got up and went to the door. He flung it wide open. "MacTate." He leaned out and looked around. "What happened to Mars?"

MacTate joined him.

"Did your hysteresis thing give out?" MacTate turned to look for the black box. "I say, old boy, what happened to it?"

Ransom looked down. The black box was not beside the door. "What —?" He looked around the room. "MacTate. Where is it?"

MacTate pursed his lips. "Old boy, are you sure that thing was a space folder? I mean, are you sure it didn't simply operate on our minds?"

Ransom looked at him. "You mean we *imagined* all this?"

"Well, you could make out a plausible case for it. Those allusions to a red and yellow tower, for instance. And eggs. And Helen's remarks about thoats and Warhoons. All that's in Edgar Rice Burroughs, you know."

Ransom scowled thoughtfully, then shook his head. "No, no. They just talked about things that registered with us through a sort of Edgar What's-his-name vocabulary." He looked at the spot where the box had been. "Anyway, the box didn't make us imagine itself. You saw it before I plugged it in, didn't you?"

"Could it have disintegrated?"

"Plug and all? How could it?" Ransom shook his head. "And what about the cigarette lighter? There's not a trace —" Suddenly his eyes widened. He turned to MacTate and pointed a finger at him. "MacTate. That Helen. She did steal my cigarette lighter, didn't she?"

MacTate looked at him curiously. "I suppose she did."

"And she thought the ozone around the box was perfume, didn't she? Remember? She seemed to think it was kind of heavy, but she did call it perfume."

MacTate rubbed his jaw. "Yes, I —"

"And remember how funny she looked when she asked me what the drawing was on my desk? As if she was trying to distract our attention. Didn't she?"

"You mean —?"

"Sure. She stole the box, too." Ransom slapped the top of his head. "My God, what a character. Now who'll ever believe me about the folding tensor?" He sank into the swivel chair. "And they had the nerve to call us monsters."

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"That reminds me," said MacTate, sitting down again. "I wonder where they thought we came from? They took it as a matter of course that we were used to heavier air and gravity. And they seemed to know we were bisexual, too, because they asked if I were your mate, and not one of your mates. You'd think a trisexual people would —"

"MacTate." Ransom looked a little embarrassed and lowered his voice. "That's what really puzzles me about them. How did they —"

"Old boy." MacTate smiled. "That's the third time you've wondered about that. Let me set your mind at rest. Being neither a biologist nor an engineer, I haven't the slightest idea —"

"What are you talking about?" Ransom looked at him. "You get the craziest ideas, MacTate." He shook his head reproachfully. "What puzzles me is how they figured we were mates. They seemed to know we were bisexual, like you said. But in that case" — he frowned and lowered his voice again — "which of us did they think was the female?"

With Dignity Yet

Oldtime connoisseurs of science fiction conventions will be saddened to learn that the tenth anniversary world convention, to be held in Chicago at the Hotel Morrison from August 30 to September 1, is not to be known as Chicon II or the DecAnnVention or any similar neologism, but simply as "The Tenth Anniversary World Science Fiction Convention," in keeping with the newly attained dignity of the medium and (it says here) its fans. Guest of honor, most deservedly, will be Hugo Gernsback, virtually the creator of American science fiction; and the featured speaker will be John W. Campbell, Jr., the most significant influence in the development of the more modern form. Ted Sturgeon will sing science-fiction ballads; the secretary-treasurer is the only beautiful editor in the profession, Bea Mahaffey; and one of your own unbeautiful editors will be somewhere on the program. Even with dignity thrown in, you can't go wrong. For registration and information, send one dollar *at once* (this is a regretfully belated notice) to Miss Mahaffey at Box 1422, Chicago 90.

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Harry Lawton is a bookseller, a vendor of folio and old calf. As such, he has had long and weird experience with those victims of that peculiar mania known as "collecting." In this, his first story, he draws on that experience to paint a wryly humorous picture of an avid collector facing the collapse of civilization.

Extracts From a Bibliomaniac's Journal

by HARRY LAWTON

May 8. I spent the morning browsing the bins of Oakland bookshop. This afternoon I sat in my apartment collating my first editions of Stephen Crane. Envy consumes me when I think of those rich enough to possess *Maggie.* Alas, that elusive cornerstone to my collection! Am I doomed never to run my fingers along its yellow wrappers?

As I write, black clouds are sprawling overland from the sea, bits of dust that were once cities and men. There is a black cloud across the land . . . how remote from my world!

May 11. I could not read today. All afternoon the annoying sound of bombers streaking northward droned harshly upon my ears.

May 16. A prize! I acquired the 1874 edition of Sebastian Brandt's *The Ship of Fooles* in a ten cent bin. Later, I jubilantly told a friend.

"How can you continue collecting?" he shouted. "Have you seen a paper? Don't you know they destroyed Washington last night? The President, Congress — everything — gone!"

Poor fellow!

The streets are in a turmoil. Buses and cars are stopped everywhere. Crowds fighting along Broadway, in Oakland. I gathered we had dropped hydrogen bombs on the cities of the enemy.

I suppose Anatole France is right. "The wise man will collect enough dynamite to blow up this planet. When its fragments fly through space an

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imperceptible amelioration will be accomplished in the universe and a satisfaction given to the Universal Conscience."

May 30. The obliteration of Los Angeles is on everyone's lips. How terrible that a fine library like the Huntington should be destroyed!

June 3. I wish they'd get it over with, whatever they're about. I went down to the corner drugstore this evening. The clerk is hysterical because radio from the east is cut off. He says Armageddon has arrived. Idiot!

Spent a quiet evening in bed with *Rasselas.*

June 6. Perhaps the clerk was right . . .

June 7. I now possess — I hesitate for fear I shan't be believed. (Yet it lies before me in fine morocco binding. Not a tall copy, to be sure. Yet it is mine.)

The Man in the Moone, by Domingo Gonsales. London, 1638. What science fiction collector could resist it?

The rubble I crawled through to claim it!

I was so fearful it had been destroyed. But it was there intact, safely hidden in — no, I shall not say what dealer's shop I found it in. Besides, the wretch is dead.

June 8. I had no time for writing on June 6. I must explain my fortunate escape. I was in one of the vaults of the University Library on that day. Even so, the shock burst my eardrums and I hemorrhaged some blood.

Am I the only person alive in this city? I suppose so. The Bay Bridge is gone. I can see the fires of San Francisco from my apartment. I must find a way across the water. There are many shops to look into over there.

Finished reading *Rasselas.* There is much sound advice in that book.

June 9. All day I trudged back and forth between still smouldering shops and my apartment. My shelves are filling rapidly — I must allow for more space. I waste no time now on trifles like *Maggie.* I am after much richer game!

The excitement has brought on a slight fever.

June 10. Roamed the Oakland estuary today searching for a serviceable boat to cross the Bay. What an idiot I've been! Until now I had forgotten the First Folio of Shakespeare in San Francisco. I must possess it! I shall!

Took cold tablets this evening for my dizziness.

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June 11. Fever worse. Remained in bed and read intermittently.

Can the fire have destroyed *it?* I am tormented by fears.

June 12. I can only hobble about the apartment. I tried going out a few hours ago, but my legs were too unsteady. The Folio still absorbs me, but a new thought has entered my head. Is it only the flu? I must read up on the symptoms of radioactivity.

June 13. I have a fine medical library, yes, a fine medical library.

See! Here is Laurentius Rusius. 1489 old vellum. A noble treatise on the diseases of horses.

Here is Miles Coverdale's *How and Whither a Chryften man ought to flye the horryble Plague of the Peftilence.*

One section of my apartment is shelved with such medical gems.

The fever is worse. I am continually in a hot or cold sweat. I have surrounded the bed with books relating to the fever.

Here is what one authority advises:

"Take live millepedes; pound them with a little powder of nutmeg: add of burnt fponge, one fcruple. To thefe mix a bit of the powdered horn of the Unicorn."

Propped against my pillows, I shall leisurely assimilate material relating to my condition. I have, as I remarked, an excellent medical library — containing nothing, positively nothing, I am delighted to say, later than 1800.

Note:

If you enjoy The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, you will like some of the other Mercury Publications:

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine

True Crime Detective

Mercury Mystery Books

Bestseller Mystery Books

Jonathan Press Mystery Books

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

THE TREND toward original hard-cover appearance of stories unpublished in any magazine reached its peak to date in the two-month period under consideration in this column, with the publication of ten new imaginative novels, eight of them science fiction. Unfortunately only two of these can be commended to the adult reader; but these two earn this department's loudest praise.

You'll recall Arthur C. Clarke's fine 1951 study of the preparations for the first moon-flight, PRELUDE TO SPACE. Now Mr. Clarke devotes the same convincingly detailed plausibility and effective narrative simplicity to the problems of colonization on another planet in SANDS OF MARS (Gnome). Longer and more fully plotted than PRELUDE, it's a mite less satisfactory to the old hand, since the plot-elements are pretty familiar; but it's ideal as first-level science fiction for the intelligent and literate reader not yet so blasé that he demands intergalactic elaborations, and even the old-timer may confess that he's rarely seen familiar elements so well handled.

Cyril M. Kornbluth's TAKEOFF (Doubleday) is another first-level novel, on the same preparing-for-the-moon theme as last year's Clarke. But Kornbluth has found a way to make this elementary material at once absorbing to the novice and exciting to the most habituated, by blending it with a strong and suspensefully understated spy-murder plot and with writing and characterization of straight-novel caliber. Economical, subtle and compelling, this must rank as one of the major originals yet published in hard-covers.

During this same period there were seven collections of magazine shorts published of which we can recommend three. By all odds foremost of these is the second volume of "Don A. Stuart" stories, CLOAK OF AESIR (Shasta), by John W. Campbell, Jr. Reading these pieces written between 1935 and 1939, one is struck by their amazing modernity of concept and extrapolation; the germination of John Campbell, editor, is readily apparent in the writing and thinking of "Don A. Stuart." Campbell, the editor, evaluates "Stuart's" work in an introduction whose accurate and objective self-appraisal should serve as a model for other writers in judging their own works. Highlighted by the classic *Forgetfulness* this volume offers the reader

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that rarely achieved combination of original thinking and high adventure — it is definitely a *must* for any collection! One of the finest writers developed by Campbell, Fritz Leiber, contributes a magnificent short novel, *Destiny Times Three*, to Martin Greenberg's FIVE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS (Gnome). This superb story of the Terran future in three alternate worlds is certainly one of the finest stories Leiber has ever written. Present in the collection, but not well accounted for, are Norvell W. Page, Norman L. Knight, A. E. Van Vogt and Jack Williamson. It is some five years since August Derleth gave us an anthology of straight supernatural fiction. His NIGHT'S YAWNING PEAL (Pellegrini & Cudahy) is eminently readable but not up to the superlative standard we have come to expect from editor Derleth. While Dunsany's lovely bit of irony *The Sign* and Derleth's own *The Lonesome Place* would be tops in anyone's book, the rest of the stories, while enjoyable, are just a bit average. But devotees will be pleased to learn that Lovecraft's *The Case Of Charles Dexter Ward* is herein published for the first time in readable type.

If we've found little to recommend in recent new books, the crop of reprints and reissues is loaded with imperative items. For twenty-five or thirty-five cents you can get Ray Bradbury's THE ILLUSTRATED MAN (Bantam), L. Sprague de Camp's ROGUE QUEEN (Dell), Philip Wylie's THE DISAPPEARANCE (Cardinal), John Wyndham's REVOLT OF THE TRIFFIDS (Popular), and GREAT TALES AND POEMS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE (Cardinal). The first four were reviewed here with strongest praise on their first publication, and all four appeared on our "Best of 1951" list. The Poe volume is less imaginatively edited than the slightly more expensive Rinehart collection; but it does offer a tremendous word-count of classics for the money.

In hard-cover reissues, Dover offers FIVE ADVENTURE NOVELS OF H. RIDER HAGGARD, and Didier presents Jules Verne's THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN HATTERAS and EIGHT HUNDRED LEAGUES ON THE AMAZON. The Verne items are not the Pioneer Master's best, but still of immeasurable historical interest and strong reminders of Verne's too often overlooked skill at lively character-humor. The Haggard collection, which includes SHE, KING SOLOMON'S MINES, and ALLAN QUARTERMAIN, can hardly be overpraised, despite the Victorian ampleness called "wordy" by those same readers who tolerate the outrageous padding of most pulp science fiction. Here are lost-race themes treated with a combination of mysticism, depth of character, and glorious high adventure that no other story-teller has yet equaled.

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It has been our experience that new writers are inclined to tackle old themes, especially those shunned by the veteran professional, but with a fresh approach that usually produces some new twist that has us (and others) muttering to ourselves, "Now why didn't I think of that!" Such a brilliant tyro is Marion Gross. In this, her first story, she concerns herself with time travel, a subject whose possibilities some people claim have been completely exhausted. Miss Gross is unaware of this dim view; she cheerfully proves that there is always something new to be done with a time machine; if used properly it can become a priceless boon to the housewife.

The Good Provider

by MARION GROSS

MINNIE LEGGETY TURNED up the walk of her Elm Street bungalow and saw that she faced another crisis. When Omar sat brooding like that, not smoking, not "studying," but just scrunched down inside of himself, she knew enough after 40 years to realize that she was facing a crisis. As though it weren't enough just trying to get along on Omar's pension these days, without having to baby him through another one of his periods of discouragement! She forced a gaiety into her voice that she actually didn't feel.

"Why, hello there, Pa, what are you doing out here? Did you have to come up for air?" Minnie eased herself down beside Omar on the stoop and put the paper bag she had been carrying on the sidewalk. Such a little bag, but it had taken most of their week's food budget! Protein, plenty of lean, rare steaks and chops, that's what that nice man on the radio said old folks needed, but as long as he couldn't tell you how to buy it with steak at $1.23 a pound, he might just as well save his breath to cool his porridge. And so might she, for all the attention Omar was paying her. He was staring straight ahead like he didn't even see her. This looked like one of his real bad spells. She took his gnarled hand and patted it.

"What's the matter, Pa? Struck a snag with your gadget?" The "gadget" filled three full walls of the basement, and most of the floor space besides, but it was still a "gadget" to Minnie; another one of his ideas that didn't quite work.

Omar had been working on gadgets ever since they were married.

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When they were younger, she hotly sprang to his defense against her sisters-in-law: "Well, it's better than liquor, and it's cheaper than pinochle; at least I know where he is nights." Now that they were older, and Omar was retired from his job, his tinkering took on a new significance. It was what kept him from going to pieces like a lot of men who were retired and didn't have enough activity to fill their time and their minds.

"What's the matter, Pa?" she asked again.

The old man seemed to notice her for the first time. Sadly he shook his head. "Minnie, I'm a failure. The thing's no good; it ain't practical. After all I promised you, Minnie, and the way you stuck by me and all, it's just not going to work."

Minnie never had thought it would. It just didn't seem possible that a body could go gallivanting back and forth the way Pa had said they would if the gadget worked. She continued to pat the hand she held and told him soothingly, "I'm not sure but it's for the best, Pa. I'd sure have gotten air-sick, or time-sick or whatever it was. What're you going to work on now that you're giving up the time machine?" she asked anxiously.

"You don't understand, Min," the old man said. "I'm through. I've failed. I've failed at everything I've ever tried to make. They always *almost* work, and yet there's always something I can't get just right. I never knew enough, Min, never had enough schooling, and now it's too late to get any. I'm just giving up altogether. I'm through!"

This *was* serious. Pa with nothing to tinker at down in the basement, Pa constantly underfoot, Pa with nothing to keep him from just slipping away like old Mr. Mason had, was something she didn't like to think about. "Maybe it isn't as bad as all that," she told him. "All those nice parts you put into your gadget, maybe you could make us a television or something with them. Land, a television, that would be a nice thing to have."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Min. I wouldn't know how to make a television; besides, I told you, it almost works. It's just that it ain't practical. It ain't the way I pictured it. Come down, I'll show you." He dragged her into the house and down into the basement.

The Time Machine left so little free floor space, what with the furnace and coal bin and wash tubs, that Minnie had to stand on the stairway while Pa explained it to her. It needed explanation. It had more colored lights than a pinball machine, more plugs than the Hillsdale telephone exchange, and more levers than one of those new-fangled voting booths.

"Now see," he said, pointing to various parts of the machine, "I rigged this thing up so we could move forward or back in time and space both. I thought we could go off and visit foreign spots, and see great things happening, and have ourselves an interesting old age."

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"Well, I don't rightly know if I'd have enjoyed that, Pa," Minnie interrupted. "I doubt I'd know how to get along with all them foreigners, and their strange talk and strange ways and all."

Omar shook his head in annoyance. "The Holy Land. You'd have wanted to see the Holy Land wouldn't you? You could have sat with the crowd at Galilea and listened to the Lord's words right from His lips. You'd have enjoyed that, wouldn't you?"

"Omar, when you talk like that you make the whole thing sound sacrilegious and against the Lord's ways. Besides, I suppose the Lord would have spoke in Hebrew, and I don't know one word of that and you don't either. I don't know but what I'm glad you couldn't get the thing to work," she said righteously.

"But Min, it does work!" Omar was indignant.

"But you said ——"

"I never said it don't work. I said it ain't practical. It don't work good enough, and I don't know enough to make it work better."

Working on the gadget was one thing, but believing that it worked was another. Minnie began to be alarmed. Maybe folks had been right, maybe Omar had gone off his head at last. She looked at him anxiously. He seemed all right and now that he was worked up at her, the depression seemed to have left him.

"What do you mean it works, but not good enough?" she asked him.

"Well, see here," Omar told her, pointing to an elaborate control board, "It was like I was telling you before you interrupted with your not getting along with foreigners, and your sacrilegion and all. I set this thing up to move a body in time and space any which way. There's a globe of the world worked in here and I thought that by turning the globe, and setting these time controls to whatever year you had in mind, you could go wherever you had a mind to. Well, it don't work like that. I've been trying it out for a whole week and no matter how I set the globe, no matter how I set the time controls, it always comes out the same. It lands me over at Main and Center, right in front of Purdey's Meat Market."

"What's wrong with that?" Minnie asked. "That might be real convenient."

"You don't understand," Omar told her. "It isn't *now* when I get there, it's twenty years ago! That's the trouble, it don't take me none of the places I want to go, just Main and Center. And it don't take me none of the times I want to go, just twenty years ago, and I saw enough of the depression so I don't want to spend my old age watching people sell apples. Then on top of that, this here timer don't work," he pointed to another dial. "It's supposed to set to how long you want to stay, wherever you want

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to go, but it don't work at all. Twenty minutes, and then woosh, you're right back here in the basement. Nothing works like I want it to."

Minnie had grown thoughtful as Omar recounted the faults of the machine. Wasn't it a caution the way even a smart man like Pa, a man smart enough to make a time machine, didn't have a practical ounce to his whole 148 pounds? She sat down heavily on the cellar steps and, emptying the contents of her purse on her broad lap, began examining the bills.

"What you looking for, Min?" Omar asked.

Minnie looked at him pityingly. Wasn't it a caution. . . .

Purdey the butcher was leaning unhappily against his chopping block. The shop was clean and shining, the floor was strewn with fresh sawdust and Purdey himself, unmindful of the expense, had for the sake of his morale donned a fresh apron. But for all that Purdey wished that he was hanging on one of his chromium-plated meat hooks.

The sky was blue and smogless, something it never was when the shops were operating and employing the valley's 5,000 breadwinners. Such potential customers as were abroad had a shabby, threadbare look to them. Over in front of the Bijou old Mr. Ryan was selling apples.

While he watched, a stout, determined looking woman appeared at the corner of Main and Center. She glanced quickly around, brushing old Mr. Ryan and his apples with her glance, and then came briskly toward Purdey's shop. Purdey straightened up.

"Afternoon, Ma'am, what can I do for you?" He beamed as though the light bill weren't three months overdue.

"I'll have a nice porterhouse," the lady said hesitantly. "How much is porterhouse?"

"Forty-five a pound, best in the house." Purdey held up a beauty, expecting her to change her mind.

"I'll take it," the lady said. "And six lamb chops. I want a rib roast for Sunday, but I can come back for that. No use carrying too much," she explained. "Could you please hurry with that? I haven't very much time."

"New in town?" Purdey asked as he turned to ring up the sale on the cash register.

"Yes, you might say so," the woman said. By the time Purdey turned back to ask her her name, she was gone. But Purdey knew she'd be back. She wanted a rib roast for Sunday. "It just goes to show you," Purdey said to himself, surveying the satisfactory tab sticking up from the register, "there still is some money around. Two dollars and she never even batted an eyelash. It goes to show you!"

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As evidenced in his The Rats *(F&SF, December 1951), Arthur Porges has a Dafoe-like capacity for assembling and recording all those minutiae of an occurrence necessary if its whole is to be completely convincing. His detailed verisimilitude is especially effective in this brief account of an encounter that took place on a spider's web.*

The Fly

by ARTHUR PORGES

SHORTLY AFTER NOON the man unslung his Geiger counter and placed it carefully upon a flat rock by a thick, inviting patch of grass. He listened to the faint, erratic background-ticking for a moment, then snapped off the current. No point in running the battery down just to hear stray cosmic rays and residual radio-activity. So far he'd found nothing potent, not a single trace of workable ore.

Squatting, he unpacked an ample lunch of hard boiled eggs, bread, fruit, and a thermos of black coffee. He ate hungrily, but with the neat, crumbless manners of an outdoorsman; and when the last bite was gone, stretched out, braced on his elbows, to sip the remaining drops of coffee. It felt mighty good, he thought, to get off your feet after a six-hour hike through rough country.

As he lay there, savoring the strong brew, his gaze suddenly narrowed and became fixed. Right before his eyes, artfully spun between two twigs and a small, mossy boulder, a cunning snare for the unwary spread its threads of wet silver in a network of death. It was the instinctive creation of a master engineer, a nearly perfect logarithmic spiral, stirring gently in a slight updraft.

He studied it curiously, tracing with growing interest the special cable, attached only at the ends, that led from a silk cushion at the web's center up to a crevice in the boulder. He knew that the mistress of this snare must be hidden there, crouching with one hind foot on her primitive telegraph wire and awaiting those welcome vibrations which meant a victim thrashing hopelessly among the sticky threads.

He turned his head and soon found her. Deep in the dark crevice the spider's eyes formed a sinister, jewelled pattern. Yes, she was at home, patiently watchful. It was all very efficient and, in a reflective mood, drowsy

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from his exertions and a full stomach, he pondered the small miracle before him: how a speck of protoplasm, a mere dot of white nerve-tissue which was a spider's brain, had antedated the mind of Euclid by countless centuries. Spiders are an ancient race; ages before man wrought wonders through his subtle abstractions of points and lines, a spiral not to be distinguished from this one winnowed the breezes of some prehistoric summer.

Then he blinked, his attention once more sharpened. A glowing gem, glistening metallic blue, had planted itself squarely upon the web. As if manipulated by a conjurer, the bluebottle fly had appeared from nowhere. It was an exceptionally fine specimen, he decided, large, perfectly formed, and brilliantly rich in hue.

He eyed the insect wonderingly. Where was the usual panic, the frantic struggling, the shrill, terrified buzzing? It rested there with an odd indifference to restraint that puzzled him.

There was at least one reasonable explanation. The fly might be sick or dying, the prey of parasites. Fungi and the ubiquitous roundworms shattered the ranks of even the most fertile. So unnaturally still was this fly that the spider, wholly unaware of its feathery landing, dreamed on in her shaded lair.

Then, as he watched, the bluebottle, stupidly perverse, gave a single sharp tug; its powerful wings blurred momentarily and a high-pitched buzz sounded. The man sighed, almost tempted to interfere. Not that it mattered how soon the fly betrayed itself. Eventually the spider would have made a routine inspection; and unlike most people, he knew her for a staunch friend of man, a tireless killer of insect pests. It was not for him to steal her dinner and tear her web.

But now, silent and swift, a pea on eight hairy, agile legs, she glided over her swaying net. An age-old tragedy was about to be enacted, and the man waited with pitying interest for the inevitable denouement.

About an inch from her prey, the spider paused briefly, estimating the situation with diamond-bright, soulless eyes. The man knew what would follow. Utterly contemptuous of a mere fly, however large, lacking either sting or fangs, the spider would unhesitatingly close in, swathe the insect with silk, and drag it to her nest in the rock, there to be drained at leisure.

But instead of a fearless attack, the spider edged cautiously nearer. She seemed doubtful, even uneasy. The fly's strange passivity apparently worried her. He saw the needle-pointed mandibles working, ludicrously suggestive of a woman wringing her hands in agonized indecision.

Reluctantly she crept forward. In a moment she would turn about, squirt a preliminary jet of silk over the bluebottle, and by dexterously rotating the fly with her hind legs, wrap it in a gleaming shroud.

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And so it appeared, for satisfied with a closer inspection, she forgot her fears and whirled, thrusting her spinnerets towards the motionless insect.

Then the man saw a startling, an incredible thing. There was a metallic flash as a jointed, shining rod stabbed from the fly's head like some fantastic rapier. It licked out with lightning precision, pierced the spider's plump abdomen, and remained extended, forming a terrible link between them.

He gulped, tense with disbelief. A bluebottle fly, a mere lapper of carrion, with an extensible, sucking proboscis! It was impossible. Its tongue is only an absorbing cushion, designed for sponging up liquids. But then was this really a fly after all? Insects often mimic each other and he was no longer familiar with such points. No, a bluebottle is unmistakable; besides, this was a true fly, two wings and everything. Rusty or not, he knew that much.

The spider had stiffened as the queer lance struck home. Now she was rigid, obviously paralyzed. And her swollen abdomen was contracting like a tiny fist as the fly sucked its juices through that slender, pulsating tube.

He peered more closely, raising himself to his knees and longing for a lens. It seemed to his straining gaze as if that gruesome beak came not from the mouth region at all, but through a minute, hatch-like opening between the faceted eyes, with a nearly invisible square door ajar. But that was absurd; it must be the glare, and — ah! Flickering, the rod retracted; there was definitely no such opening now. Apparently the bright sun was playing tricks. The spider stood shrivelled, a pitiful husk, still upright on her thin legs.

One thing was certain, he must have this remarkable fly. If not a new species, it was surely very rare. Fortunately it was stuck fast in the web. Killing the spider could not help it. He knew the steely toughness of those elastic strands, each a tight helix filled with superbly tenacious gum. Very few insects, and those only among the strongest, ever tear free. He gingerly extended his thumb and forefinger. Easy now; he had to pull the fly loose without crushing it.

Then he stopped, almost touching the insect, and staring hard. He was uneasy, a little frightened. A brightly-glowing spot, brilliant even in the glaring sunlight, was throbbing on the very tip of the blue abdomen. A reedy, barely audible whine was coming from the trapped insect. He thought momentarily of fireflies, only to dismiss the notion with scorn for his own stupidity. Of course, a firefly is actually a beetle, and this thing was — not that, anyway.

Excited, he reached forward again, but as his plucking fingers approached, the fly rose smoothly in a vertical ascent, lifting a pyramid of taut strands

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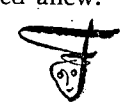
and tearing a gap in the web as easily as a falling stone. The man was alert, however. His cupped hand, nervously swift, snapped over the insect, and he gave a satisfied grunt.

But the captive buzzed in his eager grasp with a furious vitality that appalled him, and he yelped as a searing, slashing pain scalded the sensitive palm. Involuntarily he relaxed his grip. There was a streak of electric blue as his prize soared, glinting in the sun. For an instant he saw that odd glow-worm tail-light, a dazzling spark against the darker sky, then nothing.

He examined the wound, swearing bitterly. It was purple, and already little blisters were forming. There was no sign of a puncture. Evidently the creature had not used its lancet, but merely spurted venom — acid, perhaps — on the skin. Certainly the injury felt very much like a bad burn. Damn and blast! He'd kicked away a real find, an insect probably new to science. With a little more care he might have caught it.

Stiff and vexed, he got sullenly to his feet and repacked the lunch kit. He reached for the Geiger counter, snapped on the current, took one step towards a distant rocky outcrop — and froze. The slight background noise had given way to a veritable roar, an electronic avalanche that could mean only one thing. He stood there, scrutinizing the grassy knoll and shaking his head in profound mystification. Frowning, he put down the counter. As he withdrew his hand, the frantic chatter quickly faded out. He waited, half stooped, a blank look in his eyes. Suddenly they lit with doubting, half-fearful comprehension. Catlike, he stalked the clicking instrument, holding one arm outstretched, gradually advancing the blistered palm.

And the Geiger counter raved anew.



Coming . . . *in our next issue (on sale in mid-September) . . .*

Unique — and disturbing — science fiction ideas are presented by Idris Seabright, whose *An Egg A Month From All Over* indicates that even the hobbies of the interstellar future may be fraught with unpleasantness; and Michael Shaara with a fresh idea on the problems and possible perils of space travel in *Grenville's Planet.* Our usual F&SF "first" will be *Aunt Agatha*, by Doris P. Buck.

The issue will also feature one of the rare fantasy adventures of *The Saint*, by Leslie Charteris, a distinguished new story by the author of *Come On, Wagon!*, Zenna Henderson, and stories by Anthony Boucher, Miriam Allen deFord and J. T. M'Intosh.

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Strange events always draw the same strange people to witness them. Let some paranormal phenomenon appear in Maine or in California, and you'll find largely the same group seeking it out: some of them reporters, many of them psychic researchers; some sceptics come to scoff, some neurotics come for the thrill, and a few . . . A man who has written many stories under many names devotes one of his shortest and neatest tales to the nature of those few.

The Mist

by PETER CARTUR

THE BIG MAN grunted, then spoke slowly: "Can't do that, mister. I go into town Saturday nights. This is Saturday night."

The little man on the porch was trembling as he leaned forward, trying to catch the words above the noise of the hounds baying in the side yard. His small, alert face was pale, drawn, his eyes too eager. He gave the appearance of being smaller, somehow, than he should be — as though he were shrunken. His clothes hung on him, too large. His eyes were tired, lost-looking.

"Mr. — Mr. Brown, please listen. If this is real, this time — not a rumor — Please!"

Brown shook his head, slowly, his eyes careful.

"But it's what I've searched for, Mr. Brown. You've seen it. Others have. You've sworn to the truth of it."

"Sure." Brown spat, nodded his head. "Sure. And them as says we ain't are liars for sure."

"I know . . . Mr. Brown, I'm an investigator of psychic phenomena — of ghosts, and things. I *must* see that apparition tonight." The shrunken man closed his eyes for an instant, leaned against the porch post.

"Saturday night."

"But, Mr. Brown — This will be the last night."

"Might be here right along, now. I dunno."

"*I* know, Mr. Brown." The little man rubbed at his finger with the big golden ring on it. "I know. Another ten minutes at the most. And I've got to —" He stopped, let his eyes beg for him.

"Well, I reckon it's worth lookin' at, right enough."

"You're — sure of what it looks like?"

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"I know what I seen. Golden and glowing, it is. You gotta have dark to see it. Real dark. It don't move, exactly. Just stays still but sorta shimmies like."

"That's it, Mr. Brown. I've got to see it!"

"Reckon that's out, mister. I'm goin' to town."

Brown watched the little man's eyes, saw the pain in them. "Course, if it's worth somethin' — Reckon it'd have to be for me to stay home Saturday night."

"It would take a minute — A moment."

"I gotta be getting along."

"It's worth everything to me, Mr. Brown. Everything."

"How much?"

"I — I don't have money."

"Hunh!"

"I begged rides for seven hundred miles to get here."

Brown shook his head. "Nice ring you got . . . Well, I gotta be gettin' to town."

The little man dropped his hand to his side. Then he raised it again. His eyes, too, moved to the curiously shaped ring on his finger.

"I — can't let you have that."

Brown shrugged his big shoulders, stepped back and fingered the inside doorknob.

"I gotta lock up now an' let out the hounds . . . Don't be hangin' around the yard when I let out the hounds."

"No . . . Wait — You can have the ring."

Brown closed his eyes. "I don't know —"

"You can have it."

The big man opened the screen door, took the ring. He stepped back so the little man could come through the doorway. Brown struck a match, lit the lamp on the table. He turned the ring over and over, very slowly, in his thick fingers. His eyes squinted shrewdly. Golden, but not gold. Too heavy for gold — or any other metal. Much too large for the little man's fingers. Brown pushed it on his last finger, felt it grip the flesh.

The little man, moving nervously, found the bedroom door.

Brown gave him a rough shove. "Go ahead. You paid, and it ain't nothin' to hurt a man."

But the little man stood aside, let Brown lead the way.

It was a golden blot in the air, shimmering in the center of the bedroom. Eight feet high, perhaps, and about four wide.

Brown laughed coarsely. "Not a spook, is it, mister? I knew it wasn't. Reckon you was paying for a spook. Course, I didn't say it was a spook."

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The little man's face hardened. He looked at Brown, appraisingly, sadly. Then he shrugged.

"I can't quite believe you really walked through that, Brown."

"Sure." The big man laughed. "Sure I did. Watch."

"Wait. I'll walk with you. Wait!" The little man stepped forward. Then, as though still uncertain, put his fingers on Brown's arm. "All right."

Together they moved forward into the golden mist.

It was different for the big man — this time. As they entered the mist he felt sharp tingles dance over his skin. Before, there had been nothing but the feel of air. He started to step back, was stopped by surprising strength from the little man. Brown was forced forward.

The tingling was almost unbearable. It seemed to come in hot flashes, now, from the finger that wore the ring. Brown hurried, trying to get back to the familiar bedroom.

They stepped out of the mist.

There was no familiar bedroom. The house was gone, and with it the night.

Daylight. Daytime on a countryside where the grass was blue as Brown had never seen it, and where trees were slender, unbranched needles reaching for an orange sky. A sky in which Brown could see three gigantic suns.

The big man ripped free, sore, spun back to face the mist. The little man shook his head.

"We just made it, Brown. The mist is gone."

The little man was changing. He seemed to grow, fill out his clothes. "I'm sorry, Brown. I couldn't get through except with the ring — or with someone wearing the ring . . . That meant it had to be you."

"This is crazy. Where —" The big man stopped, looked again at the suns. He rubbed his forehead.

"Home. *My* home . . . Find another mist while you wear the ring. Then go home . . . to your home."

"But — a mist?"

"You'll hear rumors. Wild tales. We have stories of ghosts here, too. Be an investigator. Track down those rumors."

"But —"

"Good luck, Brown."

The little man turned quickly, began walking across the strange blue grass. Once he looked back, saw Brown staring helplessly after him. He hesitated, for an instant, then hurried on. In a moment he was among the needle trees, then out of Brown's sight.

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Since we became editors, few discoveries have surprised and pleased us as much as this short novel by Charlotte Armstrong (an abbreviated version of which appeared a few years ago in a popular women's magazine). We have long known and intensely admired Miss Armstrong's work. We were among the first enthusiasts of her straight detective stories, starring that unusually human and likable operative MacDougal Duff. We followed with lively interest her shift to the suspense novel and her Hollywood success with THE UNSUSPECTED. *We rejoiced when her fine short story* The Enemy *won EQMM's first prize in 1951, and we consider her* MISCHIEF *a serious candidate for the title of Best Psychological Thriller ever written. But none of this had prepared us for the Other Armstrong whom you'll find here — a writer who understands the true nature of logical fantasy like few authors since E. Nesbit and F. Anstey, who can take all the formula ingredients of magic-stories and twist them back to glittering newness, who can manage to be warm and imaginative and tender and extremely funny all at once. We envy you your first reading of this classic of modern fantasy.*

Three Day Magic

by CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

DO YOU BELIEVE in magic? Old-fashioned magic? That which can twang the threads of cause and effect, take a swipe right across the warp and woof of them, and alter the pattern?

If you ask George this question, he will get a look on his face, a certain look, as if he were remembering a time, an hour, maybe only a certain feeling that once he had. He'll answer, yes, he believes in magic. But he won't explain.

You'll concede he has the right to mean whatever he means by that. You'll like George.

The Casino at the Ocean House, up in Deeport, Maine, was a long room with windows to the sea. Its tables and soft lights, the dance music, gave the

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hotel's guests something to do in the evening. It was a huge success. Even the village oldsters were proud of it. "Beth'z down to the Casino, last night," they'd say. "George'z got a new trumpet. Fellow from Bath. Ayah. Pretty good, she says."

George Hale and his band played in the Casino every summer, but George, himself, belonged to Deeport, as had his Pa and his Grandpa and many other Hales before him. Tourists exclaimed over the old Hale house, up on the slope, when they saw it glimmering behind the lilacs, under the elms. But George always thought it was most beautiful in the winter when the flounces and ruffles of green fell away and it stood forth, bared and exquisite, etched by delicate shadow, white on white.

Here, also, lived his mother and two of her sisters, all three of them widows, all three doting on George, but each pretending, with a native instinct towards severity, that this was not so. Nor did Nellie Hale, Aunt Margaret or Aunt Liz ever admit that the way he earned a living was "work" at all. George had too much fun. George knew he had fun and he knew the Casino was a success. But he did not suspect what a huge success *he* was.

He was perfect for the Casino. For George felt he was in the middle of a party, any night; therefore, when he took up his saxophone as if he *had* to join, something better than the seabreeze blew across the floor. George's music may have been a little bit corny. He liked all kinds, George did, but whatever he, himself, touched, came out with a jig quality, a right foot, left foot, whirl-me-around-again ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay effect. But he was right for the Casino. He kept the customers remembering that here they were, up on the coast of Maine, breathing deeper than they breathed in town, and in touch for two weeks, more or less, with some simple source of joy.

The Casino paid George well, in fact, enough to last him a frugal winter. But it never occurred to George to push onward. Winters, he went right on enjoying himself. Then the band, and at local fees, would play for the Elks, or the High School prom. In fact, for some miles around, wherever people gathered together for fun and society, George was usually right there, beating out the festive rhythm of their mood. Deeport was proud of him, for in the winter, like the streets and the shore, he was theirs alone.

George was nearly 29, and unmarried. The neighbors speculated about this, sometimes. But his mother and the Aunts, if they speculated, said nothing. Aunt Liz darned his socks exquisitely. Aunt Margaret ironed his shirts to perfection. And his mother, without seeming to do so, based the menus on his preferences.

Naturally George had his secrets. For one thing, he played some pretty highbrow records when he was alone. For another, he believed in true love. He wasn't so naïve as to think it happened to everybody, but he did hope

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it was going to happen to him. There were certain volumes of English poetry, never caught off the shelves in the old Hale house, which grew, nevertheless, dog-eared and loose at the bindings. Oh, George, had his secrets.

One evening in August, George was leading the boys through a waltz, when a red-haired girl in a white dress floated out of the dimness in somebody's arm. Something about the line of her back, the tilt of her head as she took the turns (George played a fast bright waltz, nothing dreamy) pleased him very much for no reason he could trap by taking thought. When later, she danced by with John Phelps 3rd, an old-timer among the summer people, George gave the baton to his second fiddle, climbed down, and sought Phelps out.

She was sitting at a table with an elderly bald-headed man, who had a long sour face and cold gray eyes over which horny lids fell insolently. She was Miss Douglas. He was Mr. Bennett Blair. George didn't know who Bennett Blair was and didn't care. He invited Miss Douglas to dance.

The music happened to be another waltz. George held her off, the prettiest way to waltz, and somehow, on the crowded floor there was plenty of room. They flew along, dipping like birds. Her long white skirt fanned and flared. Her bright hair swung. Her brown eyes smiled at George and he smiled gently down.

She had no "line." Neither did George, of course. They exchanged a little information. They told each other where they lived. She lived in New York with Mr. Blair who was no kin but her guardian. She liked Maine very much. George said he'd been to New York twice and he liked it very much. It was a wonderful city. She said it was wonderful up here, she thought. And they waltzed.

When it was over, there was a small warm spot, somewhere under George's dress shirt, a little interior glow, perhaps in the heart.

The next morning George was hanging around the drugstore when she came in. It wasn't much of a coincidence, because all the summer people went to the drugstore at least twice every day. She came in alone. She wore a blue dress that was solid in the middle. He'd known she wouldn't come down to the drugstore with her ribs bare. He felt very close to her, having known this in advance as he had.

Her name was Kathleen. After she accepted his invitation to a coke so graciously, it seemed all right to ask her.

She said she was called Kathy. He said there wasn't any nickname for George, except Georgie, but he'd outgrown that of course, by the time he was six. Then he was telling her about his mother and the Aunts. Pretty

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soon, George and Kathy were walking up High Street towards the old Hale house, and inside, against their coming, Aunt Liz was wiping the pink hobnail pickle dish, Aunt Margaret was straightening the antimacassars in the sitting room, and Nellie Hale was adding just a little more milk to the chowder.

Kathy stopped at the gate and said the exact right thing. She said, "It must be just beautiful in the winter time!" George's hand on the gate shook a little as he opened it. There was a meaning to the time. It would be remembered, this moment in which Kathy Douglas stepped through his front gate.

Nellie Hale and the Aunts, for all one could tell, were absolutely hardened to George's well known habit of bringing strange and beautiful red-haired girls home for dinner. They thought nothing of it at all. But in a little while they began to unbend from this stiff proud nonchalance. For Kathy talked about old things and she understood them, too. Old things that had belonged here a long long time. She asked about Captain Enos Gray, whose cherry table they sat around. And about Captain Mark, who'd brought the china home. She listened, bemused, while the ships went out again and some went down . . . the tales were spun . . . the worn rosary of family legend was told out, bead by bead.

It was after three o'clock before George took her back to the Ocean House. They laughed a lot, skipping along the afternoon streets, her hand in his arm.

They were a little giddy, both of them.

Phelps 3rd was on the veranda, looking concerned. Mr. Blair, in a formidable beach outfit, was waiting in the lobby. He shooed Kathy upstairs. He looked at George from under his horny lids and grunted and walked away.

George came, blinking, out on the veranda again and now, too late, Phelps 3rd told him.

Kathy Douglas had as her inheritance about $5,000,000 of her own. Bennett Blair had about $10,000,000 of his own and was a power in the land. Also, upright and cold, he was a guardian who really guarded. Nobody would get Kathy except the crême de la crême in blood, character, business ability and financial standing.

She was a flower, a lovely lovely flower, but not a wild flower, nor one that had grown under amateur culture in a suburban garden. No, delicately and expensively nurtured, precious and unobtainable was Kathy. She was not, admitted Phelps 3rd, for such as he, who was heir to only half a million from Phelps 1st, toothpaste.

She was not . . . oh, heavens, never! . . . for such as George!

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For a dashed moment or two, it seemed to George that he must give her up. But then his vision cleared. By definition it was no solution to give her up. So he dismissed the notion from his mind.

The aroma of millions clung to Mr. Blair and around Kathy, too. It wafted along the harsh Maine sand of the beach, where Kathy and her Fraulein spent most of the day. Naturally, George took to the beach. Afternoons, he would greet Mr. Blair, back from his morning golf to stretch his knobby white knees to the sun. But George couldn't for the life of him dig up any mutual interests. Mr. Blair looked wearily down from an eminence of age and experience and nothing George had to offer seemed worth his response. Yet George knew he was not ignored. He felt, in the afternoons, the weight of that cold glance. He felt himself being labeled and filed in some compartment of that shrewd old brain. Mr. Blair was a guardian who really guarded. Phelps 3rd had known what he was talking about, all right.

But, somehow, seeing Kathy every day, the problem postponed itself and hung suspended in a golden time. For Kathy wasn't discouraging at all.

A golden week went by and then, one morning, Kathy came running to tell him. "George, we're leaving. We have to go!" Clouds fell over the day. "Mr. Blair had planned another week, but something has come up."

"Gosh," said George from the bottom of his heart, "I'm sorry to hear that." And yet, somewhere inside his head a little lick of triumph told him that nothing had come up at all.

George folded himself up and sat down where he was and Kathy knelt beside him. "When, Kathy?" he asked bleakly.

"This afternoon." She was frankly full of woe.

George bit his lip thoughtfully. "Back to New York?"

"Yes."

George looked at the ocean and something closed in his mind. Something said 'goodbye' to it. "Me, too," he said. "Right after Labor Day, when the Casino closes, I'm coming down."

"Oh, George! You'll come to see me!" She was all vivid and glad. Her hand moved on the sand towards his.

"I can't say anything, Kathy. I can't ask you anything, yet."

"Ask me what?" Her eyes were shining.

But George, in the bottom of his soul, agreed with Mr. Blair. Nothing was too good for Kathy. Of course, she was infinitely precious and she must have the best, the very best of everything. So he put his lips on her hand, just once, and let it go. "I'm going to be able to ask Mr. Blair," he said grimly, "the very same day."

Yet, here on the beach in the sunshine, with Kathy near and the dark blue sea and the whole world sparkling around them, the future cleared before

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him. He'd go down to New York and settle himself and make about a million dollars in some sound respectable way and then he'd ask her. It seemed not only clear and simple, but certain that all this must come to pass.

For Kathy wasn't discouraging at all.

George's decision was the result of a marching logic. Now, in the blood and character departments, George was fine. What he lacked was in the success department. So he must abandon this easy-going life. He must acquire the proof, that is to say, the money. Nothing he could do in Deeport would lead to the kind of money Mr. Blair probably had in mind. So . . .

The boys in the band were disconsolate. The manager of the hotel set up such a pained and frantic howl that George fled his office, with bitter reproaches of ingratitude, pleas for mercy, predictions of the Casino's ruin, ringing in his ears. George thought this was shock. He was sorry.

He arranged to leave the bulk of his earnings in the bank for his mother and the Aunts where it would, as it always had, take them nicely through the winter. "So you see," George explained to them hopefully, "it's not going to make any difference to you."

The three ladies tightened their mouths and agreed. Aunt Margaret, although plump, was the one who tended to fear the worst, but, of course, she didn't weep. Aunt Liz, tiny and angular, chose to look on the bright side, and smiled mysteriously to herself as if she'd been tipped off by a private angel. Nellie Hale, a blend of both temperaments, simply tightened her mouth. "George is grown," she said, and that was all she would say.

So, darned and mended, cleaned and pressed, and fed to the utter limit, George, with $200 in his pocket and his saxophone in his hand, took the train one September evening, without the faintest conception of the gap his departure tore in the whole fabric of the town's life. All hints of this he took for kindliness and so he was spared. He suffered only the wrench of his own homesickness.

New York received George and his saxophone with her customary indifference. Yet he was lucky in the first hour, for he walked by Mrs. McGurk's four-story brownstone on West 69th Street just as her hand in the front window hung up the vacancy sign.

George, trained all his life to pretend that only cleanliness mattered, saw that the square ugly room on the fourth floor was clean and so said he'd take it. Mrs. McGurk sniffed. Take it, indeed! She said she'd take him. Rent by the month, in advance. That was her rule. George paid and looked about him. The room had no charm but George, although he had always lived in the most charming surroundings, knew not the word or its defini-

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tion. The place felt queer. He imagined, however, that it was only strange.

Mrs. McGurk was a widow, 40-odd, toughened by her career. The poor woman had a nose that took, from head-on, the outline of a thin pear, and was hung, besides, a trifle crookedly on her face. Her character, though scrupulously honest, was veiled by no soft graces. Like the room, she was clean but she had no charm.

What other roomers might hole up, two to a floor, below him in this tall narrow house, George did not know. He tried to say "Good day" to a man who seemed about to emerge from the other door on his landing, but he got no answer. All he saw was a brown beard, a narrow eye, and the door, reversing itself, closing softly to wait 'til he had gone by.

George shrugged. He had other matters on his mind. First, he had to get a job. This was not very difficult since he was a member of the union in good standing. Pretty soon George had hired himself and saxophone out to Carmichael's Cats, a small dance band, playing in a small night club. It wasn't such a wonderful job, but George felt that, in this great city, first one got a toehold and then one took the time to look around.

His first night off, he called on Kathy. She lived only just across the Park in Bennett Blair's gray stone house that looked to George exactly like a bank building. He was received in a huge parlor, stuffed full of ponderous pieces, dark carving, stifled with damask in malevolent reds and dusty greens, lit by lamps whose heavy shades were muddy brown.

Kathy was glad to see him. Bennett Blair was not.

George walked home through the Park and on its margins the tall buildings glittered, high and incredible in the dark. "'Tisn't going to be so darned easy!" George thought to himself. And he tightened his mouth.

George, from his toehold, had no time to look around because the toehold gave way. Carmichael's Cats were sorry but they couldn't use him. He wasn't right.

George had to stir himself and get another job with Barney and his Bachelors. They played, as had the Cats, a jagged and stylized kind of music, full of switches and turns. Barney liked to ambush himself, to leap on a sweet passage with an odd blue interruption, to fall from a fast blare to a low whimper with shock tactics. These tricks were no ingredient of George's bag. It wasn't that he didn't like the effect. He admired it. But he couldn't do it. Barney could jerk and shake up the whole band, but not George. George would try, but first thing he knew, there he'd be, tootling along in his own jig time, following one note with the probable next at the probable interval. Being obvious! Barney was disgusted!

So George left the Bachelors, unhappily, and approached Harry and his Hornets.

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Each new month, Mrs. McGurk waited for dawn to crack, but no longer. Pay in advance was her rule and her system had no flaws. Rarely, indeed, did the sun go down upon a deficit, or a roomer escape to carry his debt unto the second day.

On the fourth floor, George, occupationally a late riser, was just getting up when she sang out, "First of the month, Mr. Hale." Her initial assault was always blithe and confident.

"Why, sure," drawled George. "Come in a minute." He fumbled under his handkerchiefs in the top drawer. "Hey," cried George in honest surprise, "I don't seem to have much money!"

The landlady's nostrils quivered, scenting battle.

"Gosh," said George reasonably, "I can't give you all of this!" In the midst of turmoil, changing jobs, George had not noticed how low his capital funds were getting. He stared at calamity. He had been here a month and a half, now, and he not only had made no progress toward his million dollars, he dared not pay the November rent!

Mrs. McGurk was nagging monotonously. "Month in advance. Told you my rule. Took the room, didn't you?"

Up in Deeport, of course, money lay in the bank. But it was not his.

"Rent's due," shrilled Mrs. McGurk. "You've got it!"

George pulled himself together. "How about taking half of it?"

She looked at the bills he offered and on her lop-sided face there was no recognition. "Half of it now," urged George. "I've just got a new job. All I want to do is see the man and get an advance." George was not going to let next week's meals out of his fingers. He couldn't. This crisis had sneaked up on him but his instinct was to meet it with caution and compromise. There was a sense, here, in which Greek met Greek.

Mrs. McGurk snorted. "Why don't you pay me and *then* go get this advance?"

"Because I'd rather do it the other way around," said George.

"Nope," said Mrs. McGurk.

"Yup."

"Nope."

"Do you think I'm trying to cheat you?" George was really curious.

"I got my rules, young man, and nobody's talked me out of them for twenty years."

George sat down on the bed and ran his hand through his hair. "I wish a little bird would tell me where the money's gone," he said ruefully.

"Either pay up or get out!" Mrs. McGurk wanted no persiflage. "I'll take two weeks notice money. You want it like that? Eh?"

George said, "The first of the month lasts 'til midnight. Take half. If I

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bring you the rest before midnight, it's my rent on time. If I don't, then this is notice money." Her face, if possible, hardened. "That's fair," said George.

"That's not the way I do business."

"But it's fair," he insisted.

"You got it, right there, and I want it!"

"You're not going to get it," said George quietly. He put the bills on the bed.

Mrs. McGurk was wild. George swung around. "Of course, there's another way that's just as fair. Give me back a half, tonight, if things go wrong. Want *me* to trust *you*?" George smiled. "O.K."

Head down, she glowered at him. Her hand snatched at the money on the bed and stuffed it furiously into her old brown handbag. Mrs. McGurk was fit to be tied. During the years of shortages, what with rent ceilings and rising costs, she had not grown rich and avarice was not her trouble. But she had acquired a taste for power, and she was not going to be jockeyed out of position. "You gimme the rest before midnight," she cried, "or I'll rent the room out from under you tomorrow." She flung herself out the door and pounded across the hall. "Mr. Josef! Mr. Josef!"

George closed his door gently. He had to think, what to do. As a matter of fact, Harry, the bandleader, hadn't been absolutely definite about taking George on. And no use looking for Harry this early. George sat down on the bed and removed all artificial props from under his spirits. Promptly they sank, way down. This ugly room was more unfriendly, uglier than ever.

But the mood was one George had been taught to cast off. He thought he'd go across the Park and see Kathy for a minute.

Kathy came in a little girl's hop down the great stairs, seeming, as always, glad to see him. But she said, "Oh, George, Mr. Blair is home. He wants to have a talk with you and I promised. . . ." George felt a chill of foreboding. "Maybe," she added hopefully, "he's too busy."

But Mr. Blair was not too busy. George was taken from Kathy's side and ushered through the high rooms to the library where Mr. Blair, entrenched behind his desk, frostily received him.

Mr. Blair was old and cold and his past lay around him here in this sanctum, relics of past enthusiasms, the accumulations of his mind. The total effect was overwhelming. There was so much, and everywhere each single item in the mass reeked of its expense. The smell of money rose like dust. George nearly choked.

Mr. Blair massaged the vague arthritic pains in his knuckles. "Mr. Hale," he said crisply, "am I correct in guessing that your reason for transplanting yourself to this city is your interest in my ward?"

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"Correct," croaked George.

A faint sigh came out of Mr. Blair. It seemed to set the dust dancing. "I envy you your youth," he said in his rusty voice. George thought of the knobby old knees that had never tanned, in all that Maine week, though he had held them so faithfully to the sun, and felt, oddly in this place, a brief pang of pity. "But," the tough old lids lowered, "I must ask you to consider my point of view."

"I recognize your point of view, sir. I wouldn't think of asking for Kathy . . . yet."

Mr. Blair pushed out his lower lip. George had jumped the interview several steps ahead. "You expect to be in a position to ask for her, ever?"

"Yes, sir. I do."

Mr. Blair went into a fast rhythm. "What is your work?" He barked.

"I . . . uh . . ."

"You play a saxophone." Mr. Blair knew the answers, too. "How much do you earn?"

"Uh . . ."

"Not very much. What prospects for the future?"

"Well . . ."

"Few," said Blair. "As a matter of fact, you are just floundering. And even if you had a job, at this moment, what prestige, what standing in the community are you aiming for?"

"But . . ."

"When can you hope to ask for Kathleen?"

George wilted. "I don't know," he admitted.

Mr. Blair took another tack. "Now, if," he purred, "you point out to me that Kathleen already has enough mere money, I would agree with you. But I'll ask you this. Have you had any business training? Have you the slightest idea how to watch over and guard her estate?"

"I intend to learn," said George desperately.

Mr. Blair let his lids fall in pure disdain. "Let me speak plainly. If you were to defy my expressed opinion, I am empowered to divert her estate into charitable channels . . ."

"No, sir," said George promptly. "That won't happen."

Bennett Blair's lids lifted and he stared a moment. "I don't accuse you of fortune hunting," he said stiffly. "I merely say, that since it will take you many years to achieve the standing I consider necessary, will you ask her now, to fix her affections on you? Can't you see that's unfair?"

George leaned back. "It certainly is," he answered steadily. "I shouldn't even risk her liking me, now. Somebody better for *her* than I am might be shut out. That's what you mean, sir, isn't it?" Mr. Blair's fish mouth re-

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mained a little open. "It does me a lot of good to see her," said George wistfully. "But I'll have to get along without that."

"Quite right," snapped Mr. Blair. "You realize what it means?"

"Yes," said George sadly.

"I cannot," said Mr. Blair crossly, "be so swayed by my admiration for your handsome attitude that I will forget to insist upon a strict accord between your principles and your actions."

"Did you think I was just talking?" asked George forlornly. He got up. "Is there some back way out?"

Mr. Blair caught his tongue between his teeth and around this physical arrangement crept a reluctant grimace verging on a smile. "Oh, no, no, no," he waved a hand. "You may speak to Kathleen, of course. You might tell her," he added ruthlessly, "how we agree."

Kathy was waiting in the parlor. George took her hands. "Goodbye," he said.

She scrambled out of the chair in alarm.

"Mr. Blair's been explaining some things and he's right, Kathy. I'd better not see you any more. Until maybe . . . someday."

Kathy's hair gleamed as if it brightened with her temper. "I won't be seeing you at all? Because Mr. Blair says you mustn't?"

"But he's right, Kathy. Maybe you don't realize . . ."

"You haven't asked me what I realize."

"I know *you* never think about money or success or things like that," groaned George. "But they have a meaning, just the same. I . . . I have a lot to do." He stepped away from her. "In the meantime, don't wait."

"What!"

"Don't . . . don't wait . . ." said George, ready to bawl.

Kathy flung out her hands in a gesture that might have been despair.

"There's only one thing to do," babbled George.

Kathy cocked her head. "Are you sure you know what it is, George?"

George's eyes were storing up the sight of her.

"I haven't any intention of waiting for you!" said Kathy boldly.

George was beyond heeding. "Then . . . Kathy, goodbye," he groaned. She looked so lovely, so tempting, so perfect, George felt he couldn't bear it another minute. He blurted out, "I hope I'll be seeing you . . . but if I never do, it was wonderful to have seen you at all. Goodbye. Goodbye."

He turned and fled.

Kathy began to breathe very quickly, in angry little gasps. She ran after him. She cried out, to the door that had already closed behind him, "Aren't you going to ask me what I mean?" The last word went up in an outraged wail. But Kathy took her hand from the door and drew away.

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It was a black morning. George walked along, staggering under a succession of blows. He was about as far down as he could get. But, gradually, the bottom began to feel solid under his feet.

He wouldn't be seeing Kathy, so he must use every moment to claw and fight his way back to her. Definitely, he must kick away the toehold of his musical background. That meant no Hornets. That meant no advance! That meant raising the rest of his rent some other way.

Well, he'd sell his saxophone. So much was settled. George's spirits began to bounce. He would close his mind to what Kathy had said. Whether she waited or not, nothing could keep him from hoping, from *trying*.

By sheer luck, he caught the landlady off guard and ran up the long stairs. On the last flight he overtook the bearded figure of his fourth floormate. "Pardon," said George. The man flattened himself against the wall, palms in, head turned, eyes furtive. He stood as if he felt himself to be invisible against the protective coloration of the wallpaper.

George paid him no mind. He knew what he had to do. When his hand went cozily around the handle of his instrument case, he beat down the sentimental pang. He reconnoitered. Mrs. McGurk's voice was raised, back in her kitchen regions, so he fled past the last newel post and escaped.

He tramped along the street, west, his mind busy solidifying plans. Sell the sax, pay the rent, read the ads, go to employment agencies, poke and pry, wedge himself in, somewhere. His imagination glanced off miracles of one kind or another, bouncing, steadying.

There probably weren't going to be any miracles, George reminded himself. He mustn't expect any magic.

He didn't believe in magic, at this time.

Something told him to stop walking. He saw that he stood before a pawnshop, looking into a very dirty window at a jumble of stuff that gleamed in the dust, whether jewelry or junk, he couldn't tell. But deeper within he could discern the dim shapes of larger objects, among them the unmistakeable curve of a violin. Musical instruments? Well, he could ask.

George opened the door and went in. A bell made a flat clank over his head. Out of the shadowy back regions, the proprietor approached, a very small man, humped and telescoped with age, his face netted with a million wrinkles. He had a dark eye, this little man, dark, liquid and gleaming.

"Yess?" he said.

George lifted his case. "How much for this?" he asked, speaking distinctly in case these ancient ears were deaf.

The proprietor fluttered back of the counter. He moved silently and somehow weightlessly. "Sixteen dollarsss," he said in a dry wisp of sound.

"Not enough," said George's Yankee blood promptly.

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The old man moved his shoulders in light indifference. But the dark eyes swam to look up, as if to suggest a hesitation. So George stood still, although his urgency, the glow of his resolution, the steam George had up, tumbled and churned around him.

The old man said, "I've got things I give you to boot."

"What things?" said George. "Look, I don't want to swap, you know. I want . . ."

"Yesss . . . but come. . . ." The whole little man was nodding, now.

George followed him along a dark lane that led to the darkest interior corner. The proprietor paused in a clearing in the jungle of objects, picked up something and set it on a low table. "If you wish," said the proprietor, "sixteen dollarsss and thisss. . . ." "Thisss" was an old carpet bag.

"What's in it?"

"See . . ."

George pulled at the double handle. "Nuh-uh. What would I want with . . . ? Hey, what's that?" He reached in. There was an old sword wedged diagonally in the bag. George had a fancy for old things and a small-boyish love for swords. He fondled the hilt of this one. The scabbard was some worn crimson stuff.

George waked himself out of a dream. The old man's bright eyes were avid and sly. "No, no," said George.

"Maybe isss antique. . . ."

"Looks antique, all right," George fished into the bag and found a small carved box. The lid opened by sliding. There was nothing in it but a flower. A rose. Artificial, he supposed. He dropped the box and rummaged again. There were soft cloth masses. There was a piece of flat metal, framed with a wrought design, burnished in the center. Old, very old. There was a small dark leather pouch. "What's this?"

"Open," said the proprietor softly.

George pulled the thong fastenings. Inside, he found a single piece of metal. Flat, lopsided, with some worn engraving on it, perhaps it was gold. "Hey," said George, "did you know this was in here?" The old man made his butterfly shrug. "Is it a coin? Is it gold?"

"Maybe . . ."

"This might be worth something," George said honestly. "Old coins, y'know."

"May be . . ." said the proprietor indifferently. "You take?"

"Wait a minute," said George, "how do you know this isn't gold? How do you know it isn't worth a lot of money?"

"I am tired," said the old man.

George looked dubious. He chewed on his lip. The whole thing was queer.

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Queer shivery feeling to this place. "I certainly don't want this bagful of junk. Give me $25 and the coin. How about that?"

"I give twenty and all thisss. So no more, not less." The sibilants sighed on the dusty air.

"You seem to want to get rid of it," murmured George. His imagination was jumping. Maybe the coin was worth a lot. Maybe the sword would sell for something to a man who knew about swords.

"I am going," said the proprietor softly, "to California."

Ah! George relaxed. He had a sense of satisfaction, and clearing of confusion. Of course! Anyone who was going to California flung off the winter garments of old caution. *He* wouldn't want to bother, this old fellow whose bones were promised to the sun!

But George was young and full of beans, and George could spare the energy that lurks at the bottom of most strokes of luck. George said, "It's a deal."

The old man's hands came up as if he would rub them together, but cautiously, he did not. He simply nodded, all over, as before, and fluttered towards his till.

When George lugged his new property out into the street, he felt perhaps he'd been had. One thing led him to hope he'd done well. The queer stark look with which the old man's eyes clung to the carpet bag, there at the last . . . as if there were something . . . something unusual . . . about this carpet bag.

As a matter of fact, it was old-fashioned, ungainly, misshapen, distended ridiculously at one bottom corner because the sword inside was really too long, and it made George feel foolishly conspicuous. The only thing to do was dump it in his room.

Even as he gained the second floor, he heard a hen-like flutter in the lower hall. He went up fast, anyway, shut himself in and began to empty the carpet bag out on his bed. Might as well see what he had here.

Across the hall, Mr. Josef held his ear against the inside panel of his own door. His eyes rolled, relishing this pose. His fat hand, on which the nails were chewed away, caressed the inner knob with delicious stealth.

Down below, Mrs. McGurk muttered to herself and began to climb.

Outside, the city roared.

George looked at what he had here. There was the pouch. He tossed it aside. The box that held a rose, the sword . . . George balanced it a moment in his hand and it felt alive. He had a terrible suspicion that he could never sell it.

There was that flat metal oval. Then there was a strange object, in metal

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that resembled a teapot and yet was not a teapot. Baffled, George put it down. He fished out a queer old flask. It seemed to be made of pinkish stone, with a stony stopper, the whole bound in an intricate metal lattice. Something swished inside. George could not get the stopper out to sniff at whatever was in there. He put it down and delved deeper.

Now he came to the fabric. First, he drew out an odd garment, made of a black, rather porous cloth that was opaque and yet so soft it seemed to melt under his fingertips. The thing was designed to be worn. The top of it was cut, obviously, to fit around ones shoulders. George blinked and put it by.

He certainly did not understand what kind of person packed this bag, nor of what kind of household these things could be the relics. There must be some rhyme or reason to this conglomeration. True, all these things were old. But what other quality they had in common he couldn't . . . at this time . . . imagine.

Rolled tightly at the bottom of the bag there now remained a small thin, old, and shabby Oriental rug. As George extracted it, something else dropped. The last object of all in the bag was a ring.

Very old. Not gold, however. Perhaps it was blackened silver. On a plain band, a wrought setting in the same dark metal held an uncut lumpish stone of a bluish gray color. This stone was curiously filmed over. George put his thumb on it. It wasn't dusty. Nothing rubbed off. It was certainly a queer looking ring. He held it in his palm, thinking suddenly of Kathy.

Mrs. McGurk rapped sharply, opened the door, and stepped in. She loosened the set of her mouth long enough to let out a "Well?"

George dropped the ring and felt for the coin in his pocket. "It's not midnight yet," he said mildly. It occurred to him that he had better hunt up an old coin man as soon as possible.

"Lying, weren't you?" she sneered. "You got no new job, and no man to see!"

George didn't answer. He just met her steady glare with a steadier look of patience and regret. Mrs. McGurk's eyes fell away. They spied the bed. "I'd thank you to keep that junk off my bedspread," she snapped.

"Sorry," said George gently. "I've got to go out again, now."

Mrs. McGurk said venomously, "Don't hurry. I've decided not to accept your full month's rent. I'm giving *you* notice, Mr. Hale."

"All right," said George patiently. "Excuse me?" He went out, past her, leaving her there.

He felt stiff and sad. There was no need for such unpleasantness. It served no purpose except to sadden and embitter the innocent day.

Mr. Josef stood in the hall. When George appeared, he turned his back and pretended to be entering his room. George started downstairs. He

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looked back. Mr. Josef was in a ridiculous position. He seemed to be staring into the blank wood, a foot and half from his face. He was not, of course. His eyes, sidewise, were watching George.

"Who," wondered George, "does he think he is, anyway?"

Mrs. McGurk, having been rude, ugly and unjust, was of course furious. She stalked about George's room, looking for something to pin her fury on. George, however, kept his things clean and orderly as effortlessly as he breathed. There was nothing for his landlady to pounce on, except the bed and its array of strange objects.

Mrs. McGurk approached it then, with nostrils dilated. But, dusty and old as many of these things appeared, nothing, no dust of any kind, had been transferred to the bedspread. Mrs. McGurk's fury began to give way to sheer curiosity.

The cloak she made nothing of. It couldn't belong usefully to a personable young man like George. The metal things she shook her head over. Junk. She wouldn't, she huffed to herself, give them houseroom.

What quiet there was, existing under the constant flow of sound from the city, was being broken hideously by a cat, down below. He was a displaced feline who lived by his wits in the deep yards in the heart of the block. He was sitting on a fence, wailing his heart out. Mrs. McGurk winced at the piercing pain of his cries.

She picked up the pinkish stone flask and shook it, but she couldn't get the stopper out, either. She opened the pouch and drew her mouth down at the sight of the flattened lump of gold that lay within it. She could not know that George, even now, was taking a similiar coin out of his pocket to show it to a man behind a counter, two blocks south. Nor could she know that George had not the slightest idea of the existence of this second coin. No thief, she merely drew the thongs tight and cast the pouch down, impatiently.

The cat wailed as if the world's end were at hand. Mrs. McGurk moved to the window and joined the neighbors in a lively exchange of shouted despair. The cat had no mind for the troubles of humans. It wailed on.

Shaking her head, Mrs. McGurk drew it into the room again. She picked up the ring. A curious piece of work. She slipped it on her finger, where it fit with a pleasant weight to it and looked, for all its queerness, rather well on her work-bitten hand.

The cat thought of something particularly outrageous and screamed in an ecstasy of self-pity. "I wish to goodness," said Mrs. McGurk out loud, "that cat would stop its yowling!"

On her hand, the dull bluish lump of stone in the ring began to catch

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light. For a brief moment, it gleamed. The dusty look of it seemed to burn away.

The cat stopped it. Abruptly. His current yowl, in fact, was cut off in the middle and never finished. Silence poured down like water and extinguished the noise.

Mrs. McGurk blinked. The precipitous quiet was just a trifle uncanny. She listened with a curious eagerness for the cat to resume, but it did not. She took off the ring and dropped it back on the bed, vaguely sorry, in an inexplicable way, that she had ever touched it.

For just a moment, the things lying on the bed up here in George's room were more than queer. Their antiquity was worse than puzzling.

"Fifty?" said the old coin man, casually. His thumb came up in a caressing pinch. His junior clerk wasn't breathing.

George made a low mirthful sound. "You've certainly been helpful," he said cheerfully. "May I see your classified directory?"

"One hundred dollars," said the man.

"Two hundred," said George gaily.

"It's a deal," snapped the man and now George staggered. In a tense silence, the junior took the coin, the money was fetched and George signed something.

Then the little office bloomed with three wide smiles.

"I'm satisfied, you know," said George. "But I wish you'd tell me . . ."

"Rare!" babbled the man. "Rare? Not even listed. And indisputably genuine. The inscriptions, the feel of the gold . . ." he rubbed his fingers, "greasy with time . . ." He slapped the counter jubilantly. "Now tell me. Where *did* you get it?"

"Found it, like I told you," said George cheerfully. "I'm certainly glad you liked it. Tell you what, if I ever run across another one, I'll let you know. So long."

George went off jauntily. The boss's mouth curled. "He'll bring us another one! Ha!"

"Ha ha!" echoed the clerk.

Mrs. McGurk had shaken off her funny feeling. She went on examining this queer collection, and at last she picked up the little carved box with the sliding lid and looked sourly at the rose inside. Artificial, she presumed. Yet . . . no . . . Or, if it were, it was a marvel! Her woman's eye could see as much. She touched it and the petals were sweet and cool. Mrs. McGurk raised the box to her crooked nose. To her senses came the unmistakeable fresh rich fragrance of the living rose.

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Just then, George opened his door.

Rose to nose, Mrs. McGurk looked full at him.

Until this day, Mrs. McGurk's impression of George had been mild. Her trained gaze had gone over him and not finding the mark of the complainer, or the destroyer of rented property, or the innocent stare of the deadbeat, she had looked no more.

This morning, however, he had offered her good faith and fair play and she had been obliged to turn them down. Under her tough protective crust still existed an uneasy heart that knew and recognized her losses. George had what she had no more . . . the capacity for trusting. Something about him was sweet to the core. And it hurt! So, of course, she had been stubbornly angry.

But now, as the perfume of the rose penetrated her senses, something very strange happened to Mrs. McGurk. This crust of hers seemed suddenly and for no cause to dissolve. Her bosom swelled as if some withered seed, lying dormant in her heart, had been touched by magic moisture so that it sprang into life and began to grow. Looking full at George, the light in her eye grew suddenly tender. How was it she had not noticed before the gentleness of his eyes, the sweetness of his smile? This was such a boy as one could be fond of, as if he were one's own, almost. Mrs. McGurk had the sensation of melting. She swayed a little. She put the rose, in its box, down on the bed and she smiled.

Even in its best day, Mrs. McGurk's smile had been rather terrifying, involving her long teeth bared to the upper gums and somehow the illusion that the bulbous end of her nose had taken a sudden twitch farther off center. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hale," said she contritely. And her inner being swooned and swam in the luxury of this humility. "I was rude and unjust to you and I'm terribly sorry."

George realized at last what she thought she was doing with her face. However, to him a kindly feeling was the most natural thing in the world and he accepted it immediately. "That's all right, Mrs. McGurk. I was probably irritating. I've got the money, now," he added gently. "Do I owe you anything?"

"My dear boy!" cried Mrs. McGurk, "of course not! You paid me for two full weeks ahead! And you must stay! This room is yours. I want you to feel at home!"

It was the first time the sweet sense of home had come to her mind for years and years. Mrs. McGurk's eyes filled. She wanted to do more for George. She felt a compelling urge to make him happy. "Please let me show you my second floor front," she snuffled. "Such a lovely room it is, Mr. Hale. It would just suit you! Only one flight up and a private bath."

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"That's mighty nice of you," said George, somewhat bewildered. "But you know I can't afford . . ."

"Same price!" cried she. "And handy to the phone!"

"Well, I . . . uh . . . if you say so," said George weakly. "It's very nice of you. But I want to pay my full month ahead. Please. I know it's your rule."

"One has to have rules, Mr. Hale. The people I meet . . ."

"Sure, I know. I don't bla —"

"But I should have *seen*," said his landlady, "that *you* are *different!*"

George realized, with some dismay, that Mrs. McGurk was trying to be charming. There she stood, in her shapeless print dress, with her hair piled up in the usual slapdash coiffure, the same woman . . . and yet . . . The head was cocked, now, in a kind of old-fashioned coquetry, the curled lip bared the long teeth; the glance came sideways from under arched brows, with the left eye not quite in focus. It was a formidable sight!

George swallowed. But, being George, he gave her full marks for effort. He thanked her.

"Oh, you will stay?" cried she. "I'll go right down. And freshen up the room a bit. Don't bother about your things. I'll move them. It's no trouble. I feel," said Mrs. McGurk "so happy to have someone like you in the house, I can't tell you . . . !" The brows ached with sweetness. She went out with a bob and a flirt of her skirt.

George sank down on the bed. He rubbed the back of his head. The money was in his hand. He stared down at it. It occurred to him that this was one of the strangest days of his life.

But here was $200, here in his hand. He began to wonder if there was more, disguised in the heap of stuff beside him. He shoved the money into a pocket and reached for that flat oval . . . But his thoughts drifted off to Kathy. Now that he had $200, was he any nearer? When would he see her again, her sweet pretty face, the red gold of her hair, the enchanting lights in her tawny eyes?

Kathy was standing in the middle of a dainty bedroom . . . on a thick white rug . . . near a soft green chair . . .

George inhaled a great gasp.

He *was* seeing her!

He had been looking absently into the burnished metal and now it was acting like a mirror but what it reflected was not here! He could see Kathy!

He lifted the thing in both trembling hands. The vision did not go. It trembled a little, but the tiny Kathy began to fumble at the fastenings of her dress!

George's hair rippled on the back of his neck. He'd heard there were

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people who could see things in a crystal ball. Now he, George Hale, of Deeport, Maine, was seeing things! Why, the strength of his love was so great . . . !

Kathy began to wiggle out of her dress. She stood in her slip, bare shouldered, adorable. Another figure crossed the little reflected scene. Fraulein!

Now, George knew darned well he wasn't in love with Fraulein!

He breathed. He had to. The image in the Magic Mirror shook with his body but did not fade.

Magic?

Kathy pushed the straps of her slip down and took hold of it at the hem. She was going to take it off. No doubt of it. Right now, across the Park, Kathy was undressing!

But George, in spite of his state of absolute astonishment, was yet a gentleman, and, above all, he adored her. So he tore his gaze from the enchanted bit of metal, turned it over, dull side up, and slid it away from him, under the pillow.

He put his reeling head in his hands.

In a little while, he lifted his face. It was rather white. Not everyday does a man run into old-fashioned magic! Slowly, he drew the pouch to him, opened it, and observed with only a dull thud of verified suspicion the presence therein of another golden coin. He took this out and put it in his pocket, drew the thongs together for a moment, and looked inside again. Sure enough. There lay the third coin. George left it there. This was the Magic Purse that never stayed empty!

Here? On 69th St.?

But what else? Suddenly he was in a frenzy to know what else. That carpet. Well, of course! He had no doubt it was the one that could fly! He got up and began to paw over his strange loot. He took up the soft black cloak, put it over his shoulders, and vanished.

That is, of course, George remained standing right where he was, but when he looked down along his body, he couldn't see it! This was the Cloak of Darkness! The very one!

He shuddered out of the thing. Cold chills were racing in his spine. He hung the Cloak in his closet, aimlessly, without thought.

Ah, the thing like a teapot! He recognized it now! He'd seen it drawn, in a hundred illustrations. It was the Lamp, the only Lamp that could qualify for this collection! Aladdin's! Must be! Must be! But George wasn't going to rub it. Not now. He didn't want to meet the Slave of the Lamp! Not this afternoon!

George inched it aside. He was excited and he was scared. He daren't stop and think. That ring? Ah, but all the old tales were full of rings, with one

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magic property or another. He slipped it on his finger, where it seemed to fit comfortably. Nothing happened.

His eye lit on the pink stone flask and he picked it up. He was convinced, now, that this, too, was magically endowed. Somehow, he had here the strangest of all collections.

(The little old proprietor must have known! How old? How old was that man? A thousand? Five thousand? He'd said he was tired! George trembled. Never mind. Don't think of it!)

Oh yes, everything here, logic insisted, must be magical.

The pink flask was heavy in his right hand. He rubbed his head. "I wish," he murmured, "a little bird would tell me what's in here."

In the Ring, forgotten on his left hand, and back of his head, the dull stone brightened. It lit, like an eye that saw, suddenly.

"Water from the Fountain of Youth." This sentence came into the air. It was like a line of music, high and full of flats. George turned his head in sharp alarm. Had he heard it? Or thought it? No sound now, certainly. Only beyond the window sill, the flutter of wings . . . Some sparrow . . .

Water from the Fountain of Youth! George loosened his fingers. He wanted none of that! Suddenly, he wanted none of any of it. He stripped off the Wishing Ring and threw it down. He understood that one might wish to get rid of these things.

It wasn't . . . well, it wasn't right! He wanted to crawl back within the safety of the possible, the steadiness and order of the natural world, the sane and simple world of splitting atoms, of nebulae, of radar and penicillin.

It is not so easy to believe in magic.

George paced up and down, conquering his fright, assimilating his wonder.

There remained the Rose and the Sword. He mistrusted the Rose. He had a shadowy recollection of the Rose and the tale of the Rose. He picked up the Sword and drew it from the scabbard.

It leaped in his hand. What a piece it was! George swung his wrist over and sliced off the top of the bedpost. The hard brass separated, clean and sharp. The upper six inches fell off on the floor.

It was impossible not to take another swipe at something. George brought his arm around. The Sword leaped and flashed down through the back, the seat, the springs of his tough, hard-cushioned leather chair. Clattering, it fell apart in two perfectly neat sections. Wood, fabric, metal, anything! Lord, lordy, what a sword! The Sword of Swiftness, or maybe Excalibur itself! He whirled the blade around his head. Whistling sweetly, it descended and cleaved the washbasin as if it were butter. A chunk of the hard porcelain came clean away and dropped with a bang on the floor. Lucky he'd missed the plumbing, for heaven's sakes! George realized he'd better restrain him-

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self. This thing was dangerous! Much, much too dangerous to play with.

He flicked the Sword at the window sill, cutting a swift notch with the bare tip. He took a neat triangle delicately out of the mirror. He fought temptation. Sweating, he made himself take up the crimson scabbard and insert therein the wicked and utterly fascinating blade.

(Outside, in the hall, Mr. Josef stood quivering. His beard was agitated. His eye yearned for George's keyhole.)

But George sheathed the Sword and put it away from him. He puffed out his breath. What to do now? Anybody else might have run for a good stiff drink, but to George came the thought that he'd had no lunch! No wonder he felt queer. Besides, he'd think better on a full stomach.

Oh, he hadn't forgotten what he was really after. It would take more than a bag of magic to make George forget what he'd wrapped his whole life around. Now, somehow, he was going to be able to ask for Kathy! All he had to do was calm himself, and think it out!

He shoved all the stuff back into the carpet bag, or thought he did. He hadn't counted the nine objects. He was too excited to check. He forgot the Mirror, still under his pillow, and the Cloak, in his closet.

The rest he packed and then he shoved the bag under the bed with the instinct to hide it. He felt of his money. He was whistling a Georgish version of *Tonight We Love* as he slammed out of his door, and went downstairs with swift heels beating out the jig time of his tune.

No sooner did George depart, in the very backwash of the sound of his going, Mr. Josef oozed across the hall. His ears shadowed George out the door far below, checked the finality of its slam. Then, softly, he put his own key into George's lock. It yielded. Mr. Josef poured himself around the edge of the door and inside.

He stared at the empty room as if he would hypnotize this space to remain empty. The closet door was half open. Mr. Josef went slinking along the wall towards it, his right hand in his pocket. Finally, he took a leap and a whirl and brought himself up sharp with the closet door wide open and he confronting and threatening George's blue serge and other garments.

Mr. Josef watched the blue serge closely for a moment. Then he took his hand out of his pocket, arranged the muscles around his eyes, and began to rake the place methodically with a narrowed glance. When he spied the chair, lying so absurdly in two pieces, his eyes rounded. In fact, they popped.

But he moved coolly to examine it. He saw the washstand and blinked incredulously at the thick raw edge where George had sliced it, at the hunk of the outer curve that lay like a piece of melon on the floor. As he crept

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over and touched it, gingerly, there came from deep in the house the thump of feet on the stairs.

It was, in fact, Mrs. McGurk, coming up.

Mr. Josef rolled himself a glance of dark warning, via the mirror. He took long crouching steps across to the door. He skated down the hall.

When Mrs. McGurk, humming *My Wild Irish Rose* in a gay wobbly soprano, had gone into George's room, Mr. Josef slipped like a shadow in soft pell-mell down the stairs to the telephone.

"X?"

"Y."

"Z!" breathed Mr. Josef. "Listen, I have stumbled on something terrific! I must have help at once! Something bigger even than A. You know what I mean?"

"Frankly, no," said Y, wearily.

"A, I say!"

"A for apple?"

"No, no, no. Nuclear Fission," hissed Mr. Josef. "Send Gogo. At once! I tell you, they have a secret weapon!"

"Yeah?"

"I saw results with my own eyes, you fool! This is of desperate importance! *Mother must know!*"

"Hm? Oh, yeah," mumbled Y. "Mother Country, that is."

"Stupid!" Mr. Josef spat into the phone. "Send Gogo. At all costs, I will secure for us this secret!"

"O.K." said Y. "Keep your shirt on. O.K. O.K."

"I will expect him here in five minutes," said Mr. Josef silkily. He hung up, silkily.

Y looked across the plain office toward the other desk. "Josef. That clown. He's got a spy complex."

"He *is* a spy," said the other man, placidly. "We all are, I suppose." He wrote down a neat numeral.

"I'd better send somebody around, if only to keep an eye on him. It's embarrassing. Why doesn't the FBI pick him up?" frothed Y. "We've betrayed him, six times over."

The other man shook his head, went on totalling some figures, compiling information received.

Y got on the phone again, angrily.

Mrs. McGurk stopped humming for a moment, when she saw the broken chair, the washbasin, the bedpost. But the warm flood of happy activity on which (under the spell of the Rose) she was floating bore her right by such

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details. If George had done the damage, he, being George, would of course make it right. They would talk it over, once he was snug downstairs.

She found his empty suitcase under the bed, beside an old carpet bag, already packed. Mrs. McGurk opened George's dresser drawers and began to fill the suitcase. At last, staggering a little, she lugged both pieces to the top of the stairs and started down.

The second floor front was a room of pleasing proportions. Mrs. McGurk felt proud of it. Into the clean paper-lined drawers of her best dresser she put George's clothing, fussing daintily with the arrangement. She was an absolutely happy woman. She was creating, with love. She was Making a Home.

She closed the drawers. The top of the dresser was bare. Ah, but his own things . . . all the little touches . . . She dove into the carpet bag. This flask, now, was a pretty thing. But the metal lattice work seemed dull. Mrs. McGurk fetched a rag and some scouring paste. Snatches of old tunes came humming out of her as she worked. Her fingers felt tireless. She was so light of heart that she wondered, intermittently, if she were not coming down with something.

At last the flask shone as bright as she could make it and she set it on the dresser and cocked her head. It looked well, but certain artistic instincts were stirring in Mrs. McGurk today. It needed balancing. She dug into the carpet bag and came out with the lamp.

Naturally, at the first swipe of her cleaning rag across its surface, the Genie materialized. It seemed for a moment that steam was pouring out of the spout-like protuberance on the lamp, but the cloud fell away rapidly to reveal a rather pleasant looking man, whose skin was on the dark side, and who wore, of course, an Oriental costume of Aladdin's day. He was standing in the air about a foot above the floor.

Mrs. McGurk leapt. She screamed! The lamp rolled off her lap. Before the Genie had time to make his set speech about being the Slave of the Lamp and so forth (which perhaps he delayed in the process of translating it from the Arabic) Mrs. McGurk cried, "Eek! Go away!"

The Slave of the Lamp, of course, obeyed her.

Mrs. McGurk stood trembling in an empty room. Then she fled that place. Ricocheting from wall to wall, blindly, she raced for the sanctuary of her kitchen.

George munched his lunch, considering ways and means. The thing was, he concluded, to show the old man that Kathy would be safe and sound as George's wife, even without her inheritance. That George, all by himself, with his own resources, could take care of her.

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At last, George rose and paid for his meal and sloped his course towards Mrs. McGurk's, stepping jauntily, trying to beat down a persistant little twinge of uneasiness. He told himself that with the Lamp, with the bottomless Purse, all *must* be magically smooth. There was a legless man, begging in the street. George put two fingers on the old gold coin in his pocket, tossed it into the cup and went swiftly on. It made him feel a trifle better to do this.

He had forgotten about his new quarters. He proceeded up the stairs, as usual, put his key in the lock of the door, and waltzed blithely in. Something hard jabbed him in the ribs. A thousand motion pictures, from childhood on, had conditioned him to know, at once, exactly what it was. His arms began to go up.

The voice behind him said, "My dear Mr. Hale, won't you . . . sit down?"

George saw the mocking eye of Mr. Josef, gleaming with pleasure. A second man came from behind the door, a large creature with a flat impassive face. George recognized the type. A henchman!

"Close the door," hissed Mr. Josef. The henchman kicked it shut.

George let the tail of his eye explore the room. The bedspread had been flung up over the pillow. He could see the curls of dust on the bare floor under the bed. The carpet bag was not where he had left it.

"Now, if you please," said Josef sternly, "the secret, and quickly!"

"What secret?"

"Come now, Mr. Hale. Surely we needn't pursue the childish course of torture?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said George. "My money's in my pocket." He pointed with his elbow.

Mr. Josef put his head to one side. "Gogo, he is going to be stubborn."

"What did *that?*" said Gogo suddenly in a reasonable tone of curious inquiry.

"Did what? Oh . . ." George saw that he meant the cut up the washbasin. "Why . . . uh . . ." He swallowed hard. "Accident," he croaked. It did not seem possible to answer this question. George realized he was in quite a spot. The fourth floor was well removed from a policeman. The house had been so quiet, no help could be in it. And there were two of them.

"What kind of accident?" asked Gogo skeptically.

Josef shoved himself between them. The gun looked wicked and unsafe in his gloved hand. "Mr. Hale, naturally you are loyal to your government. But we will, you know, by one means or another, possess this new ray."

"Huh?" said George.

Mr. Josef chuckled. "So it *is* a ray!" he purred triumphantly.

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"Ray!" said George in perfect astonishment.

"You would never," teased Mr. Josef, "make your fortune on the stage."

George simply goggled.

"Can we bribe you, Mr. Hale?" inquired Josef suddenly.

"Bribe me to do what?"

"Oh, give us specifications. We wish to know the source of this ray's power, how it is controlled, all about it. Come now."

"There is no such thing!"

Mr. Josef smiled.

"I don't know what you mean!" cried George.

Mr. Josef's eyebrows rose, pityingly.

George knew, now, he had to get away. There wasn't anything he could say. They had in their heads an explanation for the damage in his room that was just about as preposterous as the real one. They weren't going to listen to his old-fashioned stuff. And torture wasn't going to get anybody anywhere, especially George. He said, in an artful whimper, "Don't hurt me." He stumbled back a little farther. "I can't tell you anything."

"A hero," said Mr. Josef regretfully. "Ah, well, we have our little ways. No one regrets these necessities more than I do," cried Mr. Josef, frothing a bit at the mouth, "but we must know what you know, and know it now! And if we pay eventually with our lives for what we do . . . be it so!" The gun quivered with his fervor.

George made up his mind and leaped backward into the closet. He wound himself into the Cloak and leaped out again as the gun in Mr. Josef's startled hand went off. The bullet got George's blue serge in the heart, but George, in his gray, invisible and whole, slid along the wall away from danger.

"A secret passage!" screeched Mr. Josef, tearing his beard. He staggered towards the closet, eyes bulging. George lifted an invisible foot and kicked Gogo hard on the seat. The shock on the toe of his shoe felt wonderful. He only wished it had been Mr. Josef.

His visitors did not notice the door apparently open by itself, for Gogo was growling in his throat, looking on all sides for what had hit him. And Mr. Josef, with his eyes so narrowed that he could hardly see at all, was frantically clawing the inside closet wall.

George, still in the Cloak, flitted down to the second floor. The carpet bag was there, all right. He had deduced as much. Furthermore, it had been opened. George spotted the Flask. Then he saw the Lamp, on the floor. When he also saw the cleaning rag, where Mrs. McGurk had let it fall, George deduced the rest.

He sighed. He supposed the poor lady had been frightened out of her wits. He hated to sneak out on her now, especially since she had been so

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kind. But he could not stay in the same house with Mr. Josef's obsession. And his new plans involved leaving here, anyhow.

So George scribbled a note. "Inclosed please find a full month's rent . . . also what I hope will pay for the damages . . . Many thanks for your kindness . . . All best wishes . . ."

Then he listened to the house. There was a muted, though furious, buzzing still going on upstairs. He guessed he was safe here for a few more minutes.

George slid out of the Cloak and packed it. He took up the Lamp. Gently and somewhat fearfully, he brought his palm to its side and rubbed.

When the Genie appeared, George, having been braced for this, found himself unalarmed. This Genie looked like a nice fellow. Nothing ferocious about him. Little bit up in the air, of course. George smiled cordially.

"I am the Slave of the Lamp," said the Genie slowly. "What are your commands?" He used the broad A, George noticed.

"Uh, how about getting me a reservation at the Waldorf for the night?" asked George a bit nervously. "Single room, with bath, of course. Name of Hale."

The Genie bowed his turbanned head. "I hear and obey," he murmured.

"Wait a minute," said George, more easily. "As long as you're here, listen. You could build me a house, I suppose? A real nice house, furnished, and with pretty grounds? Fix it, with servants and all, so I could invite some people, say, to lunch?"

The Genie bowed.

"Lessee," said George. "About how long would it take you? Could I count on that by the middle of November?" The Genie looked simply scornful. "By next week then?" The Genie's expression remained haughty. "Tomorrow!" cried George joyfully.

The Genie drew air whistling in through his teeth. "I hear and obey," he said, as before.

"Wait a minute. Don't be in a hurry," George wished this fellow would relax and chat. "Fix it up . . . say . . . uh . . . in one of the nice parts of Westchester County. I want it to look rich, you know. Maybe there should be a swimming pool. But everything the best quality. Nothing flashy. How will I know my address?" demanded George, who liked things clear.

"I will return, Master."

"Call me . . . uh . . . Mr. Hale," said George, shuddering. "And, by the way, the servants should be regular. Not . . . uh . . . slaves, y'know. O.K.? Then, tomorrow morning, I'll be seeing you."

The Genie appeared to shimmer in the air. George didn't say any more. The Genie quietly vanished. George took up the Lamp and packed it. He

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felt exhilirated, with something of the sensation of one who defies the laws of gravity on a tight rope and walks on the wings of mere balance. Things were moving fast, all right.

He got out of the house without any trouble. The spies must have still been rooting around in the upstairs closet, and poor Mrs. McGurk was nowhere to be seen. George hefted the carpet bag and set off down the street. Whatever way he was going, he knew he was headed for Kathy.

He went by way of the Waldorf. George's natural caution . . . just common sense, after all . . . told him he'd better check on this Genie's powers, before assuming too much. But everything was fine. The great hostelry swallowed him in without a ripple in its digestion. George looked around the room they gave him, which was extremely handsome, and he decided the Genie must be the McCoy.

The time had come, here, now, and on the same day. He could call up Kathy. His throat all but closed up when he heard her voice. He managed to say, "It's George."

"Oh, George!" Kathy wasn't anything but glad. "Where are you?"

"At the Waldorf."

"What?"

"Kathy, I . . . did you miss me?" He knew it was ridiculous, but he couldn't help it.

"Oh, George," she said, "I've missed you terribly!" Then they both knew that they meant the long vista of empty days ahead of them, not the mere afternoon behind.

"Kathy, darling," cried George, in spite of himself. "Will you marry me?"

"I certainly will!" said Kathy. "Oh, George, I'm so glad you called!"

"I love you, I love you, I love you," he said.

"I'm so glad . . . so glad you c-called. . . ."

George felt like crying, too.

"Are we going to run away?" she was asking. "Shall we go to Maine? Oh George, let's! Mr. Blair can't do anything that matters."

"Kathy, I'm going to ask him for you and he's going to be glad about the whole thing . . ."

"But . . ."

"Listen, I want you and Mr. Blair to come to lunch tomorrow at my house . . ."

"Your house? Do you mean in Maine?"

"No, no . . . my new house."

"But . . ."

"Tomorrow, Kathy. I'll call him up myself. You'll come to lunch and

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you'll see. Because I can take care of you, Kathy. And I can prove it. You're going to be surprised."

"George, are you coming over?"

He said, "Kathy, I'd better not, because I promised. Sweetheart, until I can *ask* him . . . and I can, tomorrow . . . Don't you see?"

"George, are we engaged to be married?"

"I meant to wait," he groaned.

"But you didn't and I said, 'Yes.' So we are!"

"We sure are!"

"Well, then," said Kathy, "I don't see what difference anything else makes. Honestly, I don't. But do it your own way. I'll *give* you 'till tomorrow."

"Kathy, don't be mad! Kathy, would you like an emerald?"

"I've got an emerald," she wailed.

George said, "I can't stand it! Will you meet me in the tearoom on Madison, right now?"

"No," said Kathy, female that she was. "You promised. Besides, I'm all dressed for the evening. Tomorrow, dear . . . dear George . . ."

"Until tomorrow," said George, "Oh, dearest Kathy . . ."

He loved her, he loved her, he loved her!

Most of Mrs. McGurk's roomers were in their rooms on Sunday morning. Ordinarily, therefore, this was Her Day, to which Mrs. McGurk looked forward as quite the liveliest day in the week. But this Sunday, she was not in the mood.

She was, in fact, disconsolate.

The evening before, having finally conquered her fright, she had gone up to the second floor and found George's note. It seemed to her to be the sweetest letter she'd ever had, and it broke her heart. Mrs. McGurk did not see how she could Go On.

Mysteriously, he had left his clothing behind in the drawers. She puzzled all night long over this. She hoped it meant he would return, if only for a few minutes . . . Oh, she could not rent his room! No, indeed! It would remain as it was, yearning for him, and maybe . . . someday . . . She took to comforting herself with dreams.

Came the dawn, she realized that there was no sense maintaining two shrines to George's memory, on two different floors. So, rather early Sunday morning, Mrs. McGurk climbed up to his old room. She let herself in. Yes, she thought sadly, here was the real shrine, after all. For had it not been George, himself, who had broken that washbasin? Mrs. McGurk saw other traces of his being, and she flung herself on his bed for a good cry. Dimly, she

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perceived the luxury of this, how even her tears were a bath and a refreshing. Still, she wept with all her heart, until her nose, burrowing against the pillow, met something hard.

She explored with her hand and drew out the Mirror.

Mrs. McGurk sat up and wiped her eyes. This, whatever it was, had been His. Her hands caressed it. Oh, if he had only told her where he had gone! She could let him know. She could get in touch with him. But he had disappeared into the outer world and she had no clue. Oh, would she ever again see his dear face or his darling smile?

Mrs. McGurk was ready to fling herself howling into the pillow once more, when she noticed a moving image on the burnished metal surface she held in her hands. This was odd! Stony with shock, Mrs. McGurk watched the magic scene. She had been thinking of George, so, of course, it was George she saw.

George was walking on grass, looking up at the façade of a magnificent house. He moved beside beds of gorgeous flowers, chrysanthemums in white and bronze masses. He strolled on the edge of a great pool that lay like a jewel in the leaf strewn lawn.

But it was George! George, with his hands in the pockets of a new tweed suit . . . Mrs. McGurk clutched the Mirror. She was over 40. In her day, Bluebeard had murdered all his wives but one without benefit of Dick Tracy. Ah, Mrs. McGurk had known the old tales, the classics! Furthermore, just yesterday, she had seen a Genie! Now, two and two whirled together in her head. She didn't understand, but she recognized, and her heart began to beat in wild elation.

Even as she stared, George was strolling down a long curving drive. Where was he? Where? Ah, if he kept on as he was going, she might find out! Since it was the Magic Mirror and her thought controlled it, the image shifted, running ahead of George. Yes, there it was, on a stone pillar there at the end of the drive. She began to mutter, over and over again, "2244 Meadow Lane . . . 2244 Meadow Lane . . ." Now George strolled into the scene and stopped, with that look on his face, that dear baffled look he was wearing, to touch his own name on the handsome mailbox.

Mrs. McGurk sighed in a flood of peace and joy. George was at a place of his own and she had the address. She pressed the Mirror to her heart. It should never leave her!

Away down below, somebody was leaning on her doorbell. Mrs. McGurk, light as a girl, flew downward. She thrust the Mirror inside the bosom of her dress, where it was extremely uncomfortable, flung open her front door, and lavished one of her toothiest smiles on a perfect stranger who was teetering, in an obvious rage, on the stoop.

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"George Hale live here?" yelped this man.

"He isn't here right now," trilled she.

"You can tell him from me, eh's a dirty crook!" cried the caller. "Look at that!" In his trembling palm lay two old gold coins, exactly alike. "You can tell him from me," stormed the rare coin dealer, for it was he, "that he needn't send any more beggars around to my competitors with any more of this junk! He can't kid around with the Law of Supply and Demand! Maybe he tricked me once! But you tell him, if any more of these show up, I'll get the Government after him for hoarding gold! And I mean it! Good day!"

"Good day," said Mrs. McGurk. She closed the door. Her surprise gave way to a belated but loyal anger. She was about to open and shout defiance at the enemy's back when she realized that she was not alone. Somebody was breathing on her neck.

It was Mr. Josef, who had crept close behind her in his furtive way. He fingered his beard. His eyes were sly.

"Morning," said his landlady shortly.

"Oh, Mrs. McGurk," said the spy, "could you supply me with Mr. Hale's forwarding address?" She looked at him sourly. "I am rather anxious to get in touch with him," drawled Mr. Josef. "Something to his advantage . . ."

The end of Mrs. McGurk's nose twitched thoughtfully. "You don't happen to have a street map, do you?"

"Many. Many." He rubbed his hands together. "Of what district?"

"Well . . . uh . . . I don't know. You see, I . . . happen to have the street number, but not the . . . uh . . . community," blushed Mrs. McGurk.

"Quite a pretty little problem!" cried Mr. Josef, in great delight. "Come, we shall solve it. This," said he happily, "is just the sort of thing I am rather good at. Ah, fear not! We shall ferret him out, you and I!"

George had, somehow, envisioned a larger or perhaps fresher copy of the old Hale house, when he had given his orders. He had certainly expected something simpler in line and decor than this! But the Genie, naturally, George supposed, would have more Oriental ideas of what luxury was. Anyhow, George conceded, it was sure some house! It would certainly impress Mr. Blair. Since that was the point, George felt he should be satisfied.

It was still quite early Sunday morning. He had come up by Genie. That is, as soon as he'd shaved and had breakfast, he'd rubbed the Lamp. The Genie had materialized somewhat tardily. He'd seemed rather out of breath, too, and there had been definite beads of sweat on his coffee-colored

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brow. George had asked him, in all sympathy, if anything was the matter, but the fellow had only rolled his eyes in a stiff unfriendly way. George didn't wish to offend by insisting. He'd let himself be whisked up here.

In fact, George didn't know exactly where he was.

He'd gone through the whole place, picked out a suit he liked, up in the master chamber, and put it on. He'd given orders to the butler about luncheon. Now he was restless. He was anxious to get Bennett Blair out here and impress him and get it over with.

He'd drive himself back into town, he decided, incidentally finding out where he was and how to get back again. He'd call for Kathy and her guardian in the . . . lessee . . . the Cadillac.

As he drove out the gate, a state cop stopped him. "You live here?"

"Guess so," said George cheerfully. "Hale's my name."

"O.K.," said the cop mildly. He spat at the pavement.

"Say," said George, "what's the best way to get to New York from here?"

The cop told him and George rolled smoothly off, waving his thanks. In a mile or two, he wondered whether he had a license plate. If so, was it on the records, somewhere in the vast recesses of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles? George shook off the thought. It made his head ache. He began to experiment with the throttle. He felt, all of a sudden, that he'd better hurry.

The cop, left behind, stayed where he was for a while, rubbing his chin on his palm, gazing throughtfully at the house.

The funny thing was, he'd been by here, yesterday, and there'd been no house.

His head was aching a little, too.

Mr. Blair sat like an old toad, motionless, in the tonneau. The sweet air blew on him in vain. When they turned in at the gates, however, he roused. They bowled up to the front entrance. A man servant came to hand them from the car. The butler stood respectfully in the great doorway.

Within, sunshine sifted through splendid drapery to glow on the polished floor. This entrance hall, alone, would knock the old man's eye out, thought George to himself. The great stairs winding up, the rich dark paneling, the white cockatoo in his silver cage, adding that one exotic note . . .

Kathy said, "Oooooh!"

Mr. Blair said nothing. George led them into the drawing room. It was baronial. On the vast floor lay a rug of such exquisite color and pattern, such size, such texture, that Mr. Blair was forced to cover a covetous gasp with a fake clearing of his throat. George bit on his own smile. Blandly, he ordered cocktails in the library. Then, with the tail of his eye on the old man's

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face, George ushered them through the green and silver music room (with its silver piano) to the colossal coziness of the library. A soft fire bloomed in the grate. Cocktails came at once in a gold and crystal shaker.

The somber beauty of the room was absolutely still. Kathy, since her first gasp, had made no sound. Mr. Blair was stricken dumb. But he was not paralysed. He walked to and fro. He went over to the bookshelves and drew out a volume or two. Then he began to pat his hand along the shelf and mutter in his throat. He went close to a painting, peering at the corner of it. He turned on George.

"You inherited this place!"

"Well, in a way," said George. "Anyhow, it belongs to me, sir."

"Furnished, as it *is?*"

"Oh, yes. Sure."

"Did you know," demanded Mr. Blair, going so far as to point, vulgarly, with a forefinger, "that whole shelf, there, is ALL first editions?"

"Is that so?" said George pleasantly.

"That rug in the other room . . . Where did it come from?"

"It was just here," said George.

"You realize this is a Matisse?" snapped Mr. Blair, indicating the painting.

"I'll be darned," said George feebly. "I guess I hadn't noticed."

What there was of hair on Mr. Blair's head seemed to stir as if it would rise on end. He fell into a chair and seized his drink, thirstily.

Kathy went over to look out of the window. George stood behind her. "It's pretty . . . uh . . . big . . ." he murmured. Kathy nodded. "Too big," said George quietly.

Kathy leaned back just enough to seem to say, "Thou art my shield . . . in thee I trust . . ."

"Don't worry," he whispered. "We don't have to live here." She turned her cheek against his lips.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blair had picked up a small china bowl from the table. Now he looked at the under side of it and began to curse softly.

"Looking for an ashtray, sir?" George gave a host-like leap. "I guess that will do, won't it, sir?"

Mr. Blair cast George a wild glance and leaned back and blew his breath in puffs toward the ceiling.

Luncheon was served in the 40-foot dining room where they gathered like two kings and a queen in great carved chairs. At once, Mr. Blair began to examine the lace in the tablecloth.

"Kinda pretty, isn't it?" George beamed innocently. "My Aunt Liz used to crochet a lot."

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"Your Aunt Liz," exploded Mr. Blair, "never crocheted this!"

"Well, no, of course she didn't."

"Came with the place, eh?"

"Oh, yes . . ."

"Don't know much about lace, do you?"

"Well — uh — no."

"No," said Mr. Blair.

Kathy was looking blankly at the china, the crystal. Her puzzled eyes kept coming back to George's face, to say "It's all right, of course. Because it's you."

George squirmed a little. He felt, himself, that the food was, well, astonishing. He had tried to tell the butler what he would like served for this meal, but he must have been vague, or left a lot of leeway somehow, because he didn't recognize one single dish. Although it tasted fine. Mr. Blair seemed to think so.

Also, the butler kept filling wine glasses with different kinds of wine and each time, Mr. Blair would sip and then close his eyes as one in pain. George didn't drink much wine. It all tasted alike to him, anyhow, he explained cheerfully. Kathy sat, hardly eating anything but a little of the cucumber mousse, and George couldn't really eat, either.

Just so Mr. Blair had a good lunch. Because, after lunch would be the time to ask him.

In the drawing room, George's man servant brought cigars and coffee.

George cleared his throat. "Mr. Blair, I wanted you to come today because . . ."

"Yes," Mr. Blair's attention came away from the furnishings with a snap.

"Because I want to marry Kathy," said George. "I wanted to show you that I can take care of her. So now I . . . uh . . . ask your permission to . . . uh. . . ." George forgot the sentences he had made up ahead of time. "I love her so darned much!" he cried, "And she . . ."

Kathy's hand was in his. It had flown there. "Me, too," said Kathy. Their hands, holding each other tight, lifted between them, entreating him.

Suddenly Mr. Blair looked very old and very patient. He said gently, "I take it all this magnificence is supposed to impress me."

"It does," said George, sharply, for him.

"Oh, it does. It does, George," conceded Mr. Blair. He leaned back and said, coldly, "I would like very much to meet what friend of yours so kindly loaned you this place for the day."

George said, "Nobody loaned it to me, sir. It's mine."

"You will produce certain proofs?"

"Proofs?"

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"A deed to the property, perhaps. The inevitable records of ownership. My dear chap, this is rather astonishing, you know. For Kathleen's sake, I must see the proof and you cannot afford to be offended that I ask for them."

"Well, of course not," stammered George. "Gosh, I . . ."

"However," said Mr. Blair, "granting the existence of such proof, if you then think you have proved your capacities in such a way as to satisfy me, I am sorry you are so deceived. What you have done," said Mr. Blair, opening his eyes wide with an effect of pouncing, "is exactly the opposite! You've proved yourself a perfect ignoramus!"

"Huh?"

"You have no more idea what is in this house than a Hottentot!" rasped Mr. Blair. "You offer me a bowl of priceless porcelain for an ashtray! You never heard of Matisse! Don't tell me! How you imagine that I will permit . . ."

"Just a minute," said Kathy, very quietly. "George and I are engaged to be married."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kathleen," said her guardian levelly and coldly.

"Wait," cried George. "Maybe I don't know very much, but I can learn, and anyhow, it doesn't matter!"

"It matters," snarled Mr. Blair. "Kathleen's fortune will never pass into the hands of . . ."

"I don't *need* Kathy's fortune!"

"I don't *care!*" said Kathy.

"Sit down, Kathleen," barked Mr. Blair. "There is a good deal that must be explained. I want to know, and so should you, my dear, exactly how a saxophone player without a penny to his name, yesterday, claims to be in possession of a place like this, today. If, as I all along suspected, he's only borrowed it, then he is a cheat. And you'd better know it. So sit down."

With an expression of disdain on her face, an expression that signified her perfect faith in George, Kathy sat down.

"Now," snapped Mr. Blair. "Do one of two things, George, if you please. Produce your papers and explain how you got them. Or name the real owner." Suddenly Mr. Blair's toe rubbed across the soft silk of the rug, as if it had been wanting to do so for minutes. "In a way," he said, with genial brutality, "I hope you can prove yourself the owner, because, if you do, George, I intend personally to swindle you out of several things you don't *yet* know you've got here."

George looked about him, wildly. It was if his fairy godmother had turned and bit him.

But then the butler, at George's elbow, said, "I beg pardon, sir."

"Hm?"

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"People are approaching the house, sir. In fact, there are persons at the door. I don't quite know what you wish in the matter . . ."

They all became aware of crowd noises. George strode to the window. Men were milling around, out there.

"Excuse me," said George. He walked down the long drawing room to the hall and he opened the front door. The first face he saw was that of the cop he had spoken to, that morning. "Say, what is all this?" asked George, in his friendly fashion.

Everybody began to talk at once. The group converged on the door. It advanced and invaded. George was soon surrounded. Competing voices rose louder and louder.

"Who inspected your wiring here?" "Permit?" "Fire law says . . ." "Why didn't the Building Department get an application?" "I'm from the union . . ." "Who put in the plumbing here?" "Zone . . ." "You can't put up a pre-fab unless . . ." "My client . . ." "Second mortgage . . ." "Title." "Tax . . ."

Somebody was snapping the lights off and on. It seemed that others were darting off in all directions, into the depths of the house. "Hey!" said George.

"Electricians local won't . . ." "Painters and Paperhangers got a beef if you . . ." "Where's your meter?" . . .

Some were returning and screaming, now.

"My God, he's into the gas lines!" "Who inspected . . ." "What about the sewers? He can't . . ." "Wait 'till the water company . . !" "Slap a summons on him . . ." "Wrong type construction . . ." "Have to tear it out . . ." "Permit . . ."

George, in the center of the mass, struggled.

A little dark man screeched, "Telephone!" He fought his way towards the instrument. "Can't be a telephone," he whimpered. Now the state cop was braying down the noise. He achieved an uncertain quiet. He said, in it, "O.K. Mr. Hale. Your turn." The whole house vibrated.

The little man could be heard moaning low into the phone. "You're wrong. Operator! There *is* no such number!"

George clutched his hair. "Listen, I . . . I don't know what to say." A wordless growl rose from the pack. "I didn't mean to break the regulations."

The state cop said, sourly, "I figgered, when I saw this place, which wasn't here, yesterday . . . I figgered you mighta forgot a few dee-tails."

"This ain't no pre-fab!" said one. "Moved it in?" "Say, listen, you can't move a house . . ." "Permit?" "Wait till the office opens . . ." "Jeese," said one, furiously, "who does this guy think he is!" "Yeah," they cried, "who do you think y'are?"

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Kathy, cowering in the sofa, murmured, "Oh, please, Mr. Blair!" Her guardian, who had sat stonily through the beginning of it, now rose.

"Not here YESTERDAY!" said the gas man, suddenly, with distended eyeballs. They grew quiet. All grew quiet. Mr. Blair stood still.

"Not here!" screamed the white cockatoo, from his silver cage. "Not here!" Something like a shudder passed through the crowd. They moved closer to each other. They seemed to press in on George, now, silently. Their breathing alone was very loud.

"Yesterday! Yesterday!" squawked the pink-eyed bird.

George threw out his arms, thrusting them back. "Now, listen, whatever I have to do to make this right, I'll do. So go away. Write me letters, will you?"

"Will you?" said the cockatoo.

Sound began to swell again from their throats. It was working up.

"My name is Blair," said that gentleman. "Bennett Blair." The perfume of his wealth, the strong odor of much money, was wafted on the heated air. "I think my young friend," said Mr. Blair with the faintest accent on the significant noun, "is right. I fear his impetuous haste has cut a lot of red tape. But," his fish mouth closed, his cold eye held them. "Red tape doesn't bleed, you know." They gave him their murmuring chuckle, on cue. They shifted their feet in soft confusion on the carpet. "So suppose we go about this in some orderly fashion. Tomorrow is a business day . . ."

"Yeah, that's right . . ." "Good enough for me, Mr. Blair." "Sure, let the office handle it." "I wouldna come out here, only Joe called me." "Proper channels . . ." "Sure . . ."

The little man at the phone had dropped his head on his arm. "Ah . . . *no* . . ." he kept moaning. He was cursed with imagination. He contemplated the System, the ramifications, the delicate, vast, and incredibly dainty complexity . . . He stared starkly into the floor with white eyes.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Blair, with distaste, "this man is unwell . . ."

"Come on, Riley." Somebody scooped up the telephone man. "Give him air." "Come on, you guys. Get him outa here."

Thus, Mr. Blair by a potent and rather frightening magic of his own, got them all out of there. George wiped his face. The jittery butler closed the door. Then, Mr. Blair allowed himself to tremble.

"George," he said, with a fearful quaver. "Was this house here, yesterday?"

"No," said George, and sent Mr. Blair tottering.

"For the love of heaven, boy!"

"I was *going* to explain," said George. "I will. Gee! Now I understand! Poor fellow! No wonder he looked pale! Things must have gotten a little

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complicated since his day." He pulled himself together and smiled at Kathy. "Wait," he said, "'till I get my carpet bag. Let's go into the library, shall we?"

So George explained.

Now, Mr. Blair lay back on the leather sofa. His hooded eyes were brooding. Kathy, beside him, rested her cheek on her hand. George was sitting on the floor, the other side of the low table on which he'd spread his bagful of uncanny property. The big room was filled with somber light. Outside, it had come on to rain. Leaves rattled in the wet wind. But the high thick book-lined walls around them were ramparts of silence.

Kathy said, dreamily, "I suppose when he built a palace, in the old days, it would stand all by itself."

"Sure," said George. "No . . . uh . . . connections." He looked sadly at his collection. "I guess this stuff is kinda out of date. I wish I had the Mirror, though. It was wonderful."

Kathy smiled. "Was it something like television?"

George smiled back at her. "But without any sound. Doesn't it seem as if a lot of things people have wished for, they've got?"

"I guess you tend to get what you wish for," dreamed Kathy, "more or less like magic."

"Too bad . . ."

"Yes, too bad," she mused. "People wished for ways to kill and yet be far away . . . Can you un-wish? What if there gets to be too much of some kinds of magic?"

"Well," said George stoutly, "look . . . magic *can* go out of date and get outgrown. Men go past it. People change the way they think and the day comes . . . we just have no use for some kinds."

Kathy smiled very sweetly upon him.

"Of course," said George, louder, "You'd be able to live pretty comfortably with these things to fall back on."

Mr. Blair raised his head.

"Anyhow, sir," said George to him directly, "now you see why, if there's anything in this house you want, you're welcome to it."

The old man looked around the room. "No," he said. "Not now. I don't want *these* first editions, George. Or that painting. God knows what it is. It isn't human! So what does it mean?" He fidgeted. "The aroma's gone. The patina . . . Do you know what I mean?"

"It's kind of phoney," said George sadly. "Then, I can't bribe you, hm?"

Mr. Blair said nothing for a long moment. His crabbed hands massaged his knees. "Maybe you *can* bribe me," he said at last. "Maybe you can."

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George was very quick. "Any of this stuff?" He gestured towards the table. "Because I'd rather have Kathy."

Kathy said quickly, "I'd rather, too."

"Money and power," mused the old man, staring at the table, "I have. I've had a long time. Furthermore, I worked for it. I carved it out. No, there's only one of your little gadgets, George that . . . tempts me, somewhat."

Slowly, George reached out. "You're welcome to this Flask."

Mr. Blair grunted his admiration. "Yes," he said, "I . . . thank you, my boy. I somehow feel you are going to be . . . right for Kathleen. You may take it that I withdraw any objections."

George looked at Kathy joyfully and she smiled like a rosy angel.

Mr. Blair's gnarled hand closed softly on the pink stone Flask. He rested it on his knee. His head dropped forward. Chin on breast, the old man sat dreaming.

George snatched at the Ring. "Would you wear this . . . temporarily?"

Kathy said, "If you want me to."

He put it on the proper finger. He drew her up out of the seat. They skipped off together, out of the amber-colored room entirely. Her shoulder tucked under his, they slipped around the dreaming old man. They closed the door between. In the green and silver music room, they kissed, and then, George, holding her, could not speak, so filled was he with happiness.

In a little while, they sat down on a window bench in a nook behind the silver piano. George just could not say a word. He just kept looking at her . . . dear, darling, delicious Kathy!

Kathy smiled and then her eyes grew moist and then she smiled again. She looked down at the Ring. She twisted it. She put her head on George's shoulder and out of George came a soft sound like a purr, wordless, and not even chopped into thoughts at all.

Kathy sat up a little straighter and blinked her eyes. "I . . . I wish it would stop raining," she said, just aimlessly, groping for the earth.

It stopped raining.

"George," she said, "this Ring winked at me!"

"Hmmmmmmmmmmmm?"

"It seemed to. Oh, I suppose it caught the sun." The sun was shining. Kathy turned her wondering head to look out and George kissed her. She pushed him away a little, laughing. "I feel so funny," she admitted. "Do you? As if it all happened so suddenly. Oh, dear, I wish I hadn't eaten those cucumbers."

The prompt distress on George's face was comical. "Oh, never mind, silly," laughed Kathy. "It isn't import . . ." Lips parted, she looked down

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with quick suspicion at her left hand. For the taste of cucumbers had vanished. She said, in a funny little voice, "George . . ."

"Hmmmmmmmmmmmm?" He was still in a state.

"Oh . . ." she burst out, "I wish you'd *say* something!"

"I love you," said George immediately. "I love you so much I can hardly talk. Wheeee! Kathy, darling, I thought I'd lost my voice."

But Kathy was staring at the Ring. "It winked again. George, do you suppose . . . ?" She looked around the room. "George, wouldn't you like to be up in Maine, right now?"

"I don't care where we are," he babbled.

Kathy said, rather slowly, quite deliberately, "I wish we were in Deeport, Maine."

Nothing happened.

The stone in the Ring remained dull and lifeless. It felt heavy on her finger.

"Oh," said George, catching on, "you thought it was a Wishing Ring! Say, maybe it is!"

"Maybe," said Kathy thoughtfully. "One person gets just three wishes. Isn't that so?"

"That's the rules and regulations, the way I heard it," babbled George. "The heck with them." He kissed her.

But Kathy's fingers moved. The forefinger . . . rain! The middle finger . . . cucumbers! The ring finger . . . yes, indeed! George *had* said something!

"It's a bad habit," said Kathy, when she could, "to go around saying 'I wish' all the time."

There was a middle door of this room and now the knob turned, the door cracked. "Beg pardon, sir. A Mrs. McGurk is here to see you. Are you engaged, sir?"

"Darned tooting, I am!" replied George happily. "Mrs. McGurk here! For heaven's sakes! Come on, Kathy. I want you to meet her. Let's tell her! Gee, I've got to tell somebody!"

Mrs. McGurk was waiting in the drawing room. She was dressed as for church. Her hat was last Easter's madness, and under it her hair was crimped violently. Her face was stiff with peach-colored kalsomine, and she'd left a little lipstick on her long teeth.

It wasn't in George to rebuke the surge of affectionate pleasure that brought her two hands reaching out to him. The hat and the kalsomine did not obscure, from him, the real moisture in her eye. "It's nice to see you," said he cordially, and bent to pick up her handbag off the floor. It was one

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of those soft suitcases. There was something hard and heavy in it. "Did you get my note?"

"Oh, I did! I did!" She gave him a Look.

But George didn't notice. "Kathy."

Mrs. McGurk became aware of Kathy, graceful in a soft blue wool frock, moving up within George's arm, with her red gold mane so near his shoulder. "Mrs. McGurk, this is Kathy Douglas. Kathy . . . Mrs. McGurk . . ."

The landlady's head, which had frozen in mid-nod, went on with the gesture it had begun. Then she swerved and tapped George on his forearm. "But oh . . . please, George, 'Constance?' My name, you know?"

"Uh . . . very pretty name," said George feebly. He took a step back. He had a horrid suspicion.

"Have you come far, Mrs. McGurk?" said Kathy politely.

"Just from the city," said Mrs. McGurk with a lofty sniff. "A friend with a car drove me."

"But how did you . . . ?"

Mrs. McGurk cut George's question off. It could only lead to her surrender of the Mirror. So she ducked it. "Oh, George," she cried. "I thought you should know! A man called. He made the nastiest threats. Something about gold . . ."

"Gold?"

"Coins, you know. He had two of them. He seemed to think you had deceived him."

"Oh, gosh!" said George. In his mind he ticked off the bottomless Purse. Obsolete! "Well, it was kind of you to bother." George whipped back to his main concern. "Mrs. McGurk, what do you think? I'm going to be married. Kathy's promised!"

"I'm so glad," said Mrs. McGurk, with fingers turning white on the handbag. "It isn't going to make any difference," she blurted.

"What?" said Kathy.

"I want you to go on thinking of my house as home," wailed Constance. "And if ever . . ." she now shot a hard suspicious look at Kathy, "you are troubled and need a friend . . ."

"I beg your pardon," said Kathy. "George, dear, is this a relative of yours?"

"No, no. Mrs. McGurk runs a rooming house where I . . . she was very kind," said George desperately. He backed away.

"I understand!" cried Constance, dramatically. "Now, you have all this! The world is at your feet! Only remember, my dear, glitter isn't everything. Kind hearts do count . . ."

"Glitter?" said Kathy, a bit tensely.

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"And a pretty face and a hank of red hair," went on the landlady, quite carried away, "may not take the place of . . ."

"What place?" asked Kathy ominously.

"Of one who . . . boo hoo hoo . . . oh . . . hoo . . ."

"George," said Kathy, smouldering, "if you'll excuse me, please . . ."

"Don't, Kathy. Mrs. McGurk, now, you mustn't cry."

Mrs. McGurk's hat was askew. So was her nose, even more than normally. "George, she isn't right for you! Forgive me! But I think of you and you only. See how cold she is! George, think! Before it is too late!"

In Kathy a dam busted. "I'm sorry, but she can't come in here and say things like that!"

"She doesn't know what she's saying," said George in anguish. "Just . . . just bear with it . . ."

"Wouldn't it be simplest if she . . . left?" asked Kathy brightly.

"You see!" The landlady clung to George's hand. "She'd turn me out of your life! Your true friend, George . . . the truest friend . . ."

"Now, wait a minute." George held out his other hand to Kathy. "She's not to blame, Kathy. She can't help it. I realize what must have happ . . . I can explain."

But Kathy's mane rippled and flared with the swing of her body. "Maybe you'd better take this back." She pulled off the Ring and smacked it into his palm, "until you do!"

"KATHY!"

"Oh, evil temper!" cried Mrs. McGurk.

"Mr. Blair," called Kathy, as she ran. "I want to go home. Mr. Blair, please . . ."

George ripped his hand from Mrs. McGurk's moist grasp and rounded on her. "Now see here! Rose or no Rose, you're going to have to understand, Mrs. McGurk. As far as I'm concerned you were kind . . . sometimes . . . and that's all! You can't insult my girl and I won't . . . WHAT'S THAT!"

At the window there was a profile, pressed against the glass. Its eyes squinted to peer through its own shadow. Like a strange outlandish piece of vegetation, the hair of its beard hung there.

It was Mr. Josef's face of course.

George said, "How . . . ? He . . . ? Who . . . ?" He shoved the Ring on his finger. His hands curled into fists.

"Mr. Josef brought me," wailed Mrs. McGurk. "Oh George, don't be mad at me! I can't bear it!" She burst into tears.

"Excuse me," said George. He dashed off towards the music room, the way Kathy had gone.

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The old man sat dreaming. Memory, flowing like water, gently exploring the vast fields of past time. Ah, the long, long days of his life! How various they had been. How . . . after all and on the whole . . . he had enjoyed them! How wise he felt! How vividly he could now see the interplay of influences, how he had been deflected, in what ways, and why.

He should be tired. Well, he was tired, the old man thought, often and often. But the fatigue was in his body, his bones, his sinew. Not in the mind. A mind, fortified with so much experience, could play the game of life on a different level. All was illuminated, now. He saw further ahead, further behind. If it were not for the weariness of his flesh . . . what fun! What fun!

Young in spirit, he thought complacently, I have kept, for I have only refined my taste, not lost my appetite.

He roused from his reverie to realize he was alone. They'd gone, the young pair. Gone to embrace, to murmur plans. He knew. He knew. It was a shame and a pity and a waste . . . yes, waste! . . . that all he knew, all he remembered, all he had learned with such difficulty, so many pains . . . all this was tied to a declining body, chained to the span of a creature who must, at the appointed hour, long since struck for him, begin to die.

Mr. Blair took the stopper out of the Flask. He'd seen old flasks of this type. He knew the trick. It was one of the little barnacles of knowledge that had accumulated to him. He sniffed at the neck of the Flask and detected no smell. He looked about him for a vessel. There was his coffee cup. He emptied the dregs into a saucer. He drew out his handkerchief and wiped the cup quite dry.

There were no printed instruction on any label. He shook the Flask. Then he tipped it up and poured a little liquid out into the cup. A fleeting fear of poison or . . . worse . . . flat disappointment (for perhaps it was plain water) crossed his mind. But he faced the chances. Lips touched the rim. He drank.

It was perfectly tasteless.

He put down the empty cup and sat quietly where he was. He closed his eyes. A tree, in early spring, before it pushes forth its buds, must feel a deep interior thrill . . .

Mr. Blair had a moment to think this gentle thought and then he experienced a kind of personal earthquake, a sensation so entangled with that of speed that he was out in the clear at the other time-side of the whole shaking experience before he could tell himself *what* it felt like!

He opened his eyes and the room leapt into clarity. He could see, but how marvelously well! He'd forgotten how it was to see with a depth of focus, without glasses, with young eyes!

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He bounded off the sofa. Oh, the spring in his legs! The freedom to move quickly! The strong responding pump of the willing heart!

But his clothes were all askew. His trousers were far, far too loose at the waist. His coat was tight on the edge of his shoulders. Its tail was out like a bustle in the back. Mr. Blair unbuttoned his vest. He had to. He flexed his biceps. He held out his hands before him and saw that they were young.

He felt of his face, patting it with loving frantic fingers. He felt of his hair. Ah, the warm plenty of it! The soft thatch, the crisp wave at the temples! (It was blond and parted in the middle.)

George's butler crossed, with grave mien, the kitchen of George's house and said to the cook, who was his wife, "Marie, we've decided right. We give notice."

She nodded. "I don't like it, Edgar. It's odd. Those men running in . . ."

He leaned closer. "It is *very* odd. For instance, the master has a woman by each hand, in the drawing room."

"Tch . . . !"

"There is, also, a man with a beard going around the house, looking in at the windows."

"My!"

"Also . . . don't be alarmed, Marie . . . there is another man, a big fellow, watching this back door."

"Ooh . . ." said Marie. "That is odd, isn't it?"

"And," said the butler, "a strange young gentleman I never saw before is standing on his hands in the library."

"Standing on his hands!"

"As I breathe! Feet in the air!"

"Odd," she said. "No place for us, Edgar."

"Oh, no," he said. "Certainly not!"

Kathy ran through the music room. She fell against the door to the library. "Mr. Blair!"

Mr. Blair, enjoying the sweet coursing of his blood, nevertheless realized that he must stop this mere jumping about. There were bound to be certain problems. He must face them. He must contrive to avoid the hurrah and the vulgarity of public knowledge, and blend this miraculous renaissance into a prosey world without an uproar. He would, somehow, arrange for old Bennett Blair to fade away. Yes, and he would substitute himself as his own . . . what? Grandnephew! Bennett Blair 2nd! He fancied that! He would, for instance, change his signature.

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Wait . . . ! Mr. Blair took out his pen, snatched a book, and scribbled his name on the margin. Good heavens! Not so! On the contrary, he must learn to forge his own signature and force this smooth young script into the former crabbed scrawl of his ripened personality.

He laughed out loud. It didn't worry him.

Somehow, Mr. Blair's wise old mind (and it saw and knew and didn't care) was being subtly altered by the vigor of his new young body. That Cloak, for instance. He'd been indifferent to it. Might be a lot of sport, though, it now occurred to him. He chuckled. He picked up the little box. George had warned them not to touch it, or he would have put the Rose in his lapel out of sheer exuberance.

Good fellow, George! They could be friends, pals, sidekicks, buddies . . . . Amused at the layers of slang that lay like strata in his memory, Mr. Blair, just exercising another of his five rejuvenated senses, lifted the box and smelled the Rose.

He drew in the perfume. Ah . . . !

He heard his name. Kathy turned the knob. She opened the door.

Dead silent astonishment held them both.

Kathy caught on quickly. She got her voice back. "M-Mr. Blair?"

"Call me Bennett!" he said in a rich tenor. "Oh please, Kathleen. Oh, how lovely you are! I have never seen you before. Kathleen, do you know me? I am young again, and oh, my dear . . . I am young again for you! Kathleen, beautiful darling, this miracle is ours!"

"OH!" she screamed. "OH NO!" She slammed the door between them. George tore in from the drawing room.

"What's the matter?"

"He's yuh-yuh-young! He's talking about l-love!"

"That damned Rose!" said George at once. "Mrs. McGurk, too. It *is* the Rose of Love. It makes you fall . . ."

"Oh!" She was enlightened. "Oh, George, forgive me, I didn't understand. But oh, take me away from here." She was unnerved and trembling with shock.

"Wait, there's a spy . . . that crazy Josef . . ."

She started blindly toward the drawing room. "Not in there," warned George. He whisked her through the middle door to an elbow of the great hall. They were together, and this was good. This was, however, about the only factor that could be called good or even fair among all the existing circumstances, as George soon discovered.

He peered toward the front door. The big Cadillac was still standing in the drive. They might pass swiftly across the arch, ignore Mrs. McGurk . . . "Wait a minute," said George. "Nope. He's right out there.

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Joseph. He's dangerous, believe me. We can't go that way, not that way."

They stood, arm and arm, in a quandary.

Mr. Blair moved swiftly through the empty music room. At the drawing room door he came face to face with Mrs. McGurk.

"Where is she?" "Where is he?" they cried.

"Whoops!" said George, in the hall. He drew Kathy into the morning room on the opposite side of the house.

Mr. Blair strode over the great silky rug, his young feet spurning its fabulous beauty. He burst into the hall, flung open the front door. He cried into Josef's startled beard, "Hey, have you seen a beautiful red-haired girl?"

Mr. Josef, confounded, tried to look as if he were waiting for a streetcar. But Mr. Blair, seeing the Cadillac still there, slammed the door and stood with his back to it. If only he could find her! He'd done wrong. He'd frightened her. Great tides of potential gentleness, deep wells of soothing charms surged restless in his breast. If only he could find her!

George and Kathy slipped from the morning room to the dining room, through the butler's pantry to the kitchen to the back door. The servants might have been so many cupboards. George saw no way to explain this spectacle of the master and his lovely luncheon guest simply flying by, hand in hand.

On the brink of an exit, George reversed them again. "Gogo," he said. "We better not go this way."

"Why don't we use the magic? George, why can't we get the Genie?"

"Say!" said George. He pulled Kathy, another way, into the hall again, the hall that lay like the hole in a doughnut, at the center of everything.

Mrs. McGurk was in the library!

"Wait," said George. "Wait, Kathy." He was most reluctant to face the poor woman. He hesitated. He drew Kathy behind the dining room door to think.

This was an error.

Mr. Blair stood over the second maid. "Went out the back door, did they?"

"No, sir."

"Didn't?" Following a reflex, he chucked her under the chin. "Where then?"

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"That way."

Mr. Blair heaved at his sagging trousers and pursued.

The butler peered palely from the pantry.

Mr. Blair rushed into the hall, dug his heel into the carpet to brake himself, heard breathing in the library, and veered that way.

Someone was breathing. It was Mrs. McGurk. "Seen them?" She shook her head. "They're in the house. They haven't left it." Her woebegone face brightened a little. "How about giving me a hand?" suggested Mr. Blair. "Otherwise we can run circles in this squirrel cage for days."

"I want to talk to George," she quavered.

"Good. Fine." Mr. Blair's legs had temporarily given over to the jurisdiction of his wise old brain. Now he remembered to pick up the Flask and shove it into his pocket. He said, "You come and stand where you can watch the front door and the stairs while I go around again."

Mrs. McGurk nodded. But she was full of suspicion. That was George's flask! She knew it. Had she not polished it with her own two hands? Who was this odd-looking young man? And what right had he to put George's property into his pocket?

When he had gone ahead, through the music room, then quietly, before she followed, Mrs. McGurk took up the Lamp. She knew its value. George should not lose it! Not while his Constance lived! Yes, it was HIS, and she would defend it! One day he would thank her devotion for this!

When George and Kathy eased into the library, it was too late. The Lamp had gone! George sucked a tooth. His collection was sure getting scattered and it wouldn't do. He had a dreadful sinking feeling, a foreboding. This was just going to lead to all kinds of trouble. He bundled into the carpet bag all of the magic objects that remained.

Kathy whimpered. George said, "Honey, this is just awful! But I can't take you outside with those thugs hanging around." They had reached the hall's elbow again.

"Can't we try upstairs?"

George said, "Upstairs is a dead end, Kathy. You put on the Cloak. Slip out . . ."

"I want to stay with you."

"But — uh — they might shoot!"

"Then *you* must wear the Cloak!"

"No, because if they should grab YOU, I'd . . . I'd . . . I'd . . ."

Kathy pulled herself together. "Why don't I just face Mr. Blair." Her

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pretty mouth grew firm. "I've been silly . . . yes, I've been silly."

"Honey . . ." George ached to protect her. "There must be a way out of this, if I had the sense . . . I wish," he murmured unhappily, "a little bird would tell me how I could get you out of here."

"On the Flying Carpet," said the white cockatoo, tartly.

"Eh? What's that?" said George.

He was wearing the Ring. He had slipped it on his finger, long ago. At his words, of course, the stone in the Ring had become quite clear and shining. George wasn't noticing, however. He was gazing, astonished, at the cockatoo, and the cockatoo stared back, insolently, as if to say, "You dope! You shoulda thought of that!"

"George!" Kathy was jolted out of her nervous reaction. "The Ring! Oh, give me that Ring!"

"Wha . . . ?"

"Quick! I can't expl . . . Oh, quick, before you say another word!"

George gave it to her. "What's the matter?" he said. "By golly, it's the perfect solution! Come on. Upstairs."

Mr. Blair heard Mrs. McGurk give tongue, but too late. George and Kathy scrambled out a window to a flat roof. He spread out the Carpet and they sat down on it.

"Take us to Maine, if you please," said George firmly. "Deeport, Maine." And then they rose. They fell giggling into each other's arms. It was so wonderfully absurd and delightful. Here they were, together. The mad afternoon was over. They floated, free. The sun was sinking behind a band of red . . .

"Well, they're gone," said Mr. Blair.

"Yes," sighed Mrs. McGurk. Her face was calm.

Mr. Blair thought he knew whither the fugitives were flying. He saw no reason to tell this old harridan what he had guessed.

Mrs. McGurk, for her part, knew exactly what she was going to do and how she was going to find them. But she didn't intend to let this wild young man in on her secret.

"I shall go back to town," said he. "I shall just borrow George's car. May I give you a lift?"

"Oh no, thank you," she said. "I have a car."

They parted. It didn't occur to either to wonder why the other was so calm.

The rose and the gold withdrew, leaving a thin gray sky. They huddled together in the very center of the Carpet, because it was quite small, for

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two, and steep and empty air was most vividly near, on all sides. Their vehicle was rolling along through chilly space with an undulating flutter that had been a little trying, at first.

Also, there was nothing between them and the stellar distances to keep off draughts. Ah, it was bitter up here! Bitter! Finally, George had hauled the Cloak out of the bag and wrapped it around them both. This helped a great deal, although it was rather frightening and bleak to be invisible. They had to hang on to each other very close to be sure each was not utterly alone, in the middle of the air.

Irritably, George said he wished he knew who the dickens had swiped that Lamp.

Kathy said, "Don't wish, George."

He stretched a cramped leg very cautiously lest a shoe fall into New England. "Say, Kathy, why did you make me take off the Ring? What happened?"

She explained. George found her freezing hand and felt of the Ring with a numb thumb. "Kathy, if it is a Wishing Ring, I can't have used all mine up." He straightened and the Cloak fell back. "Let me get you a sandwich!"

"A sandwich! Of all things, George!"

"But you're hungry! You're starving!"

"I'm not starving," said Kathy. "I just feel as if I were starving. No!" She sat on the hand that wore the Ring. "You know," she went on, thoughtfully, pulling a corner of the Cloak up and vanishing, "you and Mr. Blair make the same mistake. You both want to take care of me. You forget I'm alive . . . and thinking and doing! I have some sense!" She squirmed indignantly. "Whatever made Mr. Blair think I'd let *you* throw my fortune around foolishly? *I'd* be there, wouldn't I? If anybody was going to throw it around foolishly, it would be both of us! You men!" Her body leaned on his. It wasn't as mad as her voice sounded.

"Honey, give me the Ring. This darned thing is too darned draughty and slow . . ."

"First you're going to have to think back. One wish you wasted, I know. That silly bird."

"Bird?" said George feebly.

"You've got a pet phrase. You said . . ." George groaned. "Oh, George, how many times?"

"Once before, in my room. I remember, now. It was a sparrow."

"Two wishes gone!" wailed Kathy. "And all of mine! That certainly settles it! No sandwich, and we'll proceed to Maine the way we're going."

"Honey, please . . . I don't like you to be cold . . ."

"I'm thinking of both of us. We just can't afford . . ."

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"I know and you're wonderful and I love you but . . ."

Kathy said she loved him, too, and the point of their dispute got lost, somehow. After a while, Kathy laid her head snug on his shoulder. The Carpet kept rolling along, and miserable as they were, it was peaceful there in the silent sky.

Suddenly, it wasn't silent. George heaved his shoulder. He pointed with an invisible hand.

It was an airliner, a silver thing, speeding the way they were going with a steady roar. It pursued. It caught up. It passed. The Carpet tossed its invisible passengers, as it bucked and staggered in the backwash.

Through the little windows they could see where the dim light bathed the warm upholstered scene. Leaning at his ease in the deep cushioned seat was a young man with blond hair (parted in the middle). He'd been dining. Now he was smoking. A pretty hostess bent to remove his tray. Mr. Blair (for it was he) knocked, as he whisked by in the sky, his lazy ashes off, and smiled up into the pretty face with a quaint turn-of-the-century wolfishness, the image of which persisted on the gray cold air when he had gone.

The Carpet kept lumbering along.

The night wore on. Mrs. McGurk took the Mirror, once more, out of her bag. She was tired and bruised from bouncing through the night in Mr. Josef's old rattletrap of a car, which he pushed so recklessly at a speed beyond comfort. At times, she'd been about to ask him to slow down, but she hated to tamper with his absorption.

"Still east?" he asked.

"Still east, I judge. They seem to be nearing Narragansett."

She and Mr. Josef were, she feared, far, far behind. Mrs. McGurk sighed. She was weary and her heart was sore, and she began to suspect that this was ridiculous. She hardly knew, any more, what she hoped. At first, it was only to see George, face to face once more, but now her resolution flagged. She was discouraged. She was . . . and her heart ached . . . growing old. Oh, she'd known *that*, all along. Still, she had hoped that even her middle-aged heart could hold the luxury of devotion. A secret spring of joy, it might have been! Ah, that devil, jealousy, had undone everything!

She had wept already. In her distress, she'd babbled. She'd mentioned magic.

But Mr. Josef didn't believe. He thought they were pursuing a helicopter. He didn't even believe in the Mirror. He'd said, scornfully, that Mrs. McGurk was guilty of reactionary thinking. No doubt, he said, it was simple radar. But when she swore she could lead them to George, he'd been perfectly willing, even eager to go on.

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The other one, that Gogo, had left them flat. He'd given a brief total opinion of the whole matter. He'd said, "Nuts!" Mr. Josef had screamed something after him, something like "Traitor!" Traitor to what? she wondered sleepily. She thrust her precious Mirror back into the depths of her bag and this time her fingers stumbled on the Lamp!

For heaven's sake! What a fool she was!

"Mr. Josef," she cried. "Stop, please!"

"At the next gas station, Madame," he said patiently.

Mrs. McGurk bit her tongue. She forbore to correct him. She really could not imagine what the sight of the Genie might do to Mr. Josef. She decided she had better not rub the Lamp until she was alone.

A mangy little roadhouse lay just beyond the next bend. It looked and was a dump. But Mrs. McGurk cried, "Stop here, Mr. Josef. Maybe," she fluttered, "you would care for something to drink? I might take a little myself."

"Ah, perhaps so." They pulled up. Mr. Josef's hand under her arm, and he looking suspiciously on all sides, they went in.

Behind the bar a hairless man with a roll of fat at the back of his neck looked up without expression. The stale smelling twilight seemed otherwise deserted.

Mrs. McGurk asked the bartender and he told her. There was the usual anteroom, the powder table. She took the Lamp out of her bag, pulled herself together, summoned courage. So, in the lady's room of Joe's Bar and Grill, Cocktails, French fries, she met, for the second time, the Slave of the Lamp. This time Constance McGurk did not flinch. She waited calmly while he introduced himself with his formula, until he had asked the conventional question. "What are your commands?"

"Bring George Hale to me," she said.

"I regret, Madame," he replied, "it is not within my power."

"What's that!" Mrs. McGurk was outraged.

"Magic cannot cross magic," the Genie told her.

"Is that so! You mean to tell me, just because he is riding around on that Carpet . . . ?"

The Genie bowed.

"Well!" said Mrs. McGurk in a huff. "A fine thing! Look here, you can do it if he gets off, can't you?"

The Genie bowed.

"Very well," she snapped. "The minute he does get off that thing, *then* bring him to me."

"I hear and obey."

"Wherever I am," she added sharply.

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"I hear and obey."

"And never mind that girl. Do you understand? I don't care . . ." The knob on the door behind was rattling. "That's all," she said quickly. "Shoo . . . go on, now."

The Genie vanished. A sullen looking blonde in a fur jacket was entering this sanctuary. Her black eye flickered on the big handbag in Constance's hands. Or did it remark her ruby (relic of Mr. McGurk) solitaire?

The blonde passed on to the inner sanctum. Mrs. McGurk slipped off her ruby and hid it, too, in her bag, which she swung by its long strap over her shoulder. It had occurred to her that she might be among thieves.

Mrs. McGurk was suspicious all over, but she had her own brand of toughness. She demanded a piece of string from the bartender, and she tied the strap of her bag to her slip strap . . . no silken wisp, this, but a broad band of strong cotton. She even tied the clasp of the bag with several loops of cord. Now! To rob her would involve more serious crime. Let them try it if they dared!

Now she turned commandingly. She said to Josef, "I want to go home."

His beard tipped up. "Dear lady," he soothed, "you must not lose heart."

"I want to go back."

"No, no, we go on!"

"It isn't necessary," she snapped.

"Ah," he purred, "I am afraid, dear lady, you don't quite understand. We . . . Go on!" Mr. Josef, locking eyes with the bartender, reached out and grasped her arm.

"Take your hand off me!" said Constance in shrill alarm.

"You see," said Mr. Josef, silkily, "you are to lead me to Hale."

"Lead *you!*"

"Did you think," Mr. Josef laughed nastily, "I've taken so many pains with no motive of my own? Ah, come," he chided. Then he barked. "To the car!"

"Help," said Constance feebly.

"Not in here, Mac," said the bartender. "Outside." He jerked his chin. He turned his back.

"Help! Murder!" cried Constance. She ran.

"Ah, no, my chickadee," said Josef merrily. As she fell out the door he caught her by her arms. He forced them back. With some of the bartender's cord, he was binding her wrists together. Joe's Bar and Grill remained indifferent. Only the neon fluttered over their heads. In this dead of night, the road lay bare.

Josef marched her to the car, forced her to the seat. "My dear woman," he said righteously, "let me assure you, you are only a means to an end.

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Function as that means and you are perfectly safe." He walked around and got in at her side. "East?" he inquired, calmly.

"East," quavered Mrs. McGurk. "Oh," prayed she, "George! Oh, George!"

When the sun rose, George at last threw off the protecting Cloak and peered over the edge. Below was Maine, and all around was morning, and suddenly George wanted the world to be as clear and crisp as it looked.

"Kathy, let's dump all this stuff! It's no good!" He held up the Rose in its box. "We don't want this around, do we?"

"I don't think you ought to dump it," said Kathy thoughtfully. "You just can't tell. It's not the fault of the *things*, George." She was sitting with her legs crossed, her brown eyes serious. "It's just that the more power you've got in your hand," mused Kathy, "the more careful you have to be how your hand turns."

George took out the Purse. "Gold sure ain't what it used to be."

"But we'll keep it." Kathy put it and the Rose in a deep pocket of her dress.

"Let's see. Mrs. McGurk must have the Mirror. Mr. Blair's got the Flask. One of them's got the Lamp. We're sitting on the dumb Carpet. And you're still wearing the Ring."

"Yes," she said, "I must remember. And here's the Cloak." She folded it over her arm, as one might put on her gloves when the train is entering the station.

"One thing left." George drew out the Sword. The hilt snuggled into his hand as if the blade were begging to dance. "I'd kinda like to . . . uh . . . hang on to this," said George sheepishly. "But I'm darned tooting going to get rid of this bag!" He buckled the sword belt around his waist. Then he lifted the carpet bag and heaved it over into space. "There!"

He felt better. He lay down on his belly and inspected the terrain. He thought he could spot the Congregational spire. George bet Kathy a dollar his mother would make him shave on an empty stomach. So they lay, giggling, peering down, kicking their heels, and the sun was warm on their backs. They forgot they'd been miserable. They were almost home.

Mr. Blair touched earth long before dawn, hired a car, and drove himself to Deeport. At the Ocean House, he registered, unchallenged, as Bennett Blair 2nd. He reserved a suite for Miss Douglas. He had her luggage put there.

Oh, he was a fox! He chuckled, looking down at George's suit that he had filched from the vast array in the upstairs wardrobe at George's fabulous

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house. All his own suits were hopeless. He was a fox! He'd thought of this!

Oh, it had been jolly, whipping down the parkways in George's Cadillac, sneaking into his own house, commanding Fraulein in an imitation of his own old voice, over the house phone, to pack for Kathy. Maneuvering the servants out of the way before he made his dash to the streets again. He was postponing, he was evading. First and foremost came Kathleen.

The darling girl had run away and he could not blame her for that. He had overwhelmed her too suddenly, pouring out such talk! Well, he could not blame himself for that, either. That glorious surge of the heart had overwhelmed him. He did not regret it.

All would be well, yet. Mr. Blair felt absolutely invincible.

He breakfasted in his room, alone. This was his first free time with a looking glass. He tried to part his blond hair on the side, but it refused. How old was he, he wondered. A scar, there, at the hairline. He remembered the occasion of it. He must be at least twenty-five. A good age! Just the right age for Kathleen!

Kathleen! Mr. Blair was, actually, in a state of civil war, his physical youth resisting his foxy old brain, so that he swayed between dreams of love and the cooler strategy of conquest.

At last, he realized that even that ancient decrepit Carpet would be ambling into port, soon. So he tore his gaze from the fascinating face in the glass, borrowed binoculars, drove off to an unpopulated stretch of beach. He would take up a post. He would meet the morning Carpet. Mr. Blair chuckled. What a glorious morning! He frisked on the pebbly strand.

Mr. Blair's wise old mind, bouncing, willy nilly, while the rest of him danced, remarked that Wall Street had never been like this!

The Carpet began to lose altitude. It was coming in for a landing on a deserted potato field. George peered anxiously over. He saw a car draw up, the figure of a man get out and run, arms waving. "Oh, my gosh!" said George in dismay.

"It's Mr. Blair, isn't it?" said Kathy calmly. "Never mind." George squeezed her hand.

The Carpet came softly, softly down. George stepped off, turned to hold his hand to his lady, and vanished.

Mr. Blair came bounding up. "Hello, hello."

"Hello," said Kathy coolly. The fact that George had vanished didn't perturb her at once. After all, they had both been vanishing, off and on, all night long. She was perfectly accustomed to the idea.

"Have a nice trip?" said Mr. Blair pleasantly.

"Not very," she answered severely. "George . . ." She missed the feel of

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his hand, the sense of his near shoulder, even more . . . "Shall we go home?"

No answer came.

"Where'd he go?" said Mr. Blair, looking about them. But Kathy began to walk straight ahead of her. She was so very tired, so very hungry . . . And George . . . Why didn't his arm come around her weary shoulders? Tears stung her eyes. She lifted her own arm to mop at them with fabric.

The Cloak hung on her arm!

But then . . . ! "Oh!" cried Kathy. "Oh! Oh!" The Lamp! Now she remembered its lost and terrible power!

"I don't understand what's happened to George," said Mr. Blair, rather angrily, "but if this is the way he takes care of you. . . !"

"I'm afraid . . . there was something," she said forlornly, "he *had* to do."

Mr. Blair's brain beat his body down in a short sharp struggle, for it knew an opportunity when it saw one. He became the soul of tender kindness. *He* would take care of her. He brought her to her room at the Ocean House. Ah, the sweet warm comfort of it, after the vast chill inhumanity of the sky! He commanded them to bring coffee . . . Oh, blessed liquid!

Thus he comforted her with the civilized arts. Now, she must bathe and rest, he said, and then take lunch, perhaps? Mr. Blair's breath grew a trifle gaspy. "Kathleen, won't you call me Bennett, now?"

He was being so kind. Kathy couldn't be ungracious. She smiled and said she'd try.

Mr. Blair's wise old mind fought like a maddened hornet in his skull against his urge to grab her. "Rest well," he counseled, and withdrew.

Sore and bewildered, Kathy nevertheless bathed and dressed herself in fresh clothing. What to do? George was gone! And she could not think how, except by the power of the Lamp. And who, then, had invoked its power but that fatuous old Mrs. McGurk? But what to do? She turned over what magic she had in stock. The Rose and the Purse? She put them in the handbag Fraulein had supplied. George was right. These things were no good. Neither could the Cloak help her. It lay on the bed. The Carpet?

Oh, heavens! It lay abandoned in the field, and what mad adventure waited now for some Yankee farmer, she dreaded to imagine. Oh, George had been so right! This troublesome, troublesome magic . . . She wished . . .

Wished! Wished, indeed! Kathy threw herself down to weep. Here hung the Ring on her finger, and she with no wishes left!

"Oh, George," wept Kathy, "George . . ."

When the sun rose and people began to appear, Mr. Josef abandoned the highways. He made the car slink through back alleys and lanes. It seemed to

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put one wheel cautiously ahead of the other, like pussy feet. Even the engine whispered along.

He had not gagged Mrs. McGurk. The poor woman was nearly speechless anyhow with misery. She had kept saying, "East . . . North . . ." at random, and he followed her directions with a queer blindness.

He kept talking. He expounded his philosophy, explaining how, by stealth, treachery, and violence, he would help make a fairer world. "No more slaves!" cried Mr. Josef, pounding the steering wheel with his fist. Mrs. McGurk's enslaved ear heard all this, but her unregenerate mind was going furiously around the same old circle. How to get free?

The Lamp was here, still tied to her person. What if Mr. Josef should open her handbag. How could she benefit? If he should accidentally rub the Lamp and summon the Genie! Of course, Mr. Josef could not, on principle, acquire a Private Slave. No, no, all must be chained alike to the wheel of the State! Mrs. McGurk wondered to herself if there was an Amalgamated Brotherhood of Oriental Genii with a closed shop. She felt hysterical. She fought down the feeling.

They were slinking along a country lane. "North?" asked Mr. Josef.

"A little east," she answered wearily, as she had been answering for hours, quite at random.

He stopped the car. There was a glade at their right; an old crabapple tree stood among wild grasses. On the left a little wood and the curve of the lane closed them in.

"We have been here before," said Mr. Josef and he turned and behind his eyes there burned a reddish anger.

Mrs. McGurk closed her eyes. He'd come out of his state. He'd noticed they weren't getting anywhere. And what to do or say now, she did not . . . did not . . . know.

Then, suddenly, George . . . George himself . . . was there, standing beside the car, leaning on the sill at her side, looking reproachfully into her face. "You shouldn't have done this, Mrs. McGurk," he said, more in sorrow than in anger.

She screamed. "George! Be careful! He . . . Gun . . . Mad . . . Oh . . . !"

"Huh?" said George.

Mr. Josef got nimbly out on his side and raced around the hood. A gun was in his hand.

George backed way from the car in confusion and surprise. His feet slipped among the sweet-scented tall grasses of the glade. His hand went, with an ancient instinct, to the hilt of the Sword.

Mr. Josef, gun in hand, charged at him. "Ha!" cried the spy. "Haha!

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Haha!" His face went into its most menacing leer. His beard wagged. "We shall continue," purred Mr. Josef, "our little chat. I will have the secret of the ray, please. And now! I'll give you two minutes, 120 seconds to explain the process verbally or turn over documents . . ."

"Secret! Documents!" cried George. "You dumb bunny! Listen, I cut up that stuff in my room with this old sword."

"Impossible," said Mr. Josef calmly.

George said, "Let me show you! Maybe you'll believe it when you see it. Maybe you'll stop this idiotic Grade-B nonsense!" He pulled the Sword half out of the scabbard.

"Nonsense," said the spy thickly. "That's typical of you stupid Americans!"

Then George really did get mad. "Now, wait a minute," he said. "Shut up a minute, you with the beard! Suppose I had a secret ray? What in hell," cried George, "makes you think I'd give it to such as you? What makes you think I'd let a mutt like you, waving a gun around, steal a better weapon? You're not fit to be trusted with a bow and arrow. I wouldn't give you *any* secret *any* time *any*where for *any* reason . . . You and your corny threats!" cried George. He drew the Sword out all the way. "You obsolete old bully! Get out of the way!"

Mr. Josef raised the gun. The rules of his craft did not permit him to kill dead somebody with a secret. Ideology said, torture. His eyes narrowed calculating pain.

The Sword leapt in George's hand. It glittered across the air like a fork of lightning. It cut the gun . . . and a fingertip . . . from Josef's hand.

Blood flowed.

Mr. Josef looked down. He often had thoughts of blood, but not often was the blood in his thoughts *his* blood. Mr. Josef turned very pale. Holding the wounded hand before him, he tipped, fainting, forward. Fascinated, George watched him fall . . . against the blade! The wicked blade, still poised in George's hand!

Mr. Josef expired at once.

George loosened his hand from the hilt of the terrible toy. It fell on the ground beside the body. His hand was stinging. It was divorced from the rest of him by its independent guilt.

George sunk his face in his hands and groaned aloud.

Mrs. McGurk said, "George, dear George, don't you mind! You couldn't help it! Untie me," she begged. "Oh, George, you don't know! When you hear, you won't feel quite so bad about him. It was self-defense, George. You had to do it."

"Untie you!" said George stupidly. He came to the car. He worked at her

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wrists. He would not touch that Sword again, even for Mercy's sake. He cut the cord with a dull penknife from his pocket.

Mrs. McGurk, in spite of the pain, moved her hands to her handbag. "Don't worry . . . don't worry . . . you and I will be far far away. See what I have!" she cried, as to a hurt baby. (See! See the pretty Lamp!)

But George shook himself. What's done is done, he thought in some hard sturdy core. Never meant to kill him. Was a kind of accident and in self-defense, besides. I'm not, probably, going to prison. He looked down the long vista of his days, every one of which the memory of this day would mar. No, he would not go to prison, he thought bleakly.

Mrs. McGurk cried out, trying to work her fingers. "Open my bag, George. The Lamp!"

"No," he said. "I can't do that." He put his hand on the bag's tied-up clasp. "This isn't the way, Constance . . . I've got to go straight through everything, now. Or always be sorry. Sorrier, I mean, than I am already. We'll have to notify the police. You'll . . . help me, won't you?"

"I will! I will!" sobbed Mrs. McGurk. "Oh, George, dear George, I'll tell them how it was. You've saved me!"

A brown animal broke out of the woods. It was a mule. A stout old woman in a dirty gingham garment . . . an old woman with a face like the gray bark of an ancient tree, was holding a rope attached to the animal.

"How do?" she said. "Had a little trouble?"

"Yes, we . . . Yes . . ."

"Seen it," she said. "Sent a kid up to the main road. He'll be back wid somebody," she continued. She leaned on the mule and scratched her tousled gray head with a twig she now took out of her mouth.

"With somebody? You mean, the police?"

"Ay-ah."

"Oh," said George. "Well, thanks very much."

There was a tableau, minutes of no sound and no motion, except the mule's gentle cropping at the grass. Then sound and motion were approaching. George left Mrs. McGurk's side and went to meet the man in uniform.

"What goes on here?" said the Law. "That a dead man over there?"

"Oh, officer!" cried Constance. "He was trying to kidnap me! He had a gun! This young gentleman was forced to . . . do it!"

"He was trying to kidnap you, you say?" said the cop, focusing on her face. Her nose was violently askew, after all she had been through. The cop blinked and looked about him.

"You know me," said the woman with the mule, putting the twig back into her mouth.

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"Say! Sure. You're the woman who keeps a bunch of pigs down there in the hollow. You see what happened here?"

"Ay-ah."

"He kill him?" The cop indicated George.

"He killed him, all right. Sliced into him. I seen it."

The cop stepped over the tall grass, looked down, looked up. "Why'd you do it?" said he suddenly, savagely, to George.

"It was . . . more or less . . . an accident . . ." George was feeling sick.

"Nah," said the woman with the mule, spitting out the twig.

"No?" said the cop. "What would you say it was, hey?"

"Murder. That's what it was," said the pig woman, not violently at all. Her dull eyes rested indifferently on George.

About noon, Kathy and Bennett Blair were settled snugly in the bar, sipping sherry. Kathy was the prisoner of inaction. Mr. Blair had agreed that, no doubt, George must have been kidnaped (in a sense that was the word) by Mrs. McGurk. But, he suggested gently, if George did not, now, care for the situation in which he found himself, then, being grown and responsible, he would make his own efforts to change it. Let, hinted Mr. Blair, George do it. While they were waiting for him, in this pleasant meantime, he and she might just explore each other's friendship a little.

Ah, he was a fox! Kathy relaxed. There was nothing else to do. And she was warm and not very hungry any more, and there was the cold beauty of the sea, outside, and she snug beside a friend who knew her well.

The manager came into the bar. "Say, Frank, I just heard something over the air. Fellow name of George Hale got picked up over to Snowden." His voice was low, but at that name Kathy was clutching the edge of the table.

"Picked up!" said the bartender. "What for?"

"Homicide. That's murder, to you."

"Murder!"

"Coincidence, eh?" chuckled the manager. "I bet you Miz Hale's phone is going to be ringing."

"Nah," said the bartender. "Nobody's going to think that's *George!* Wouldn't hurt a fly, for gossake. Besides, he's still down to New York."

"Lots of fools in this world," said the manager cheerfully. "Seems this fellow ran a man through with a sword."

"Sword, eh? Kinda unusual. I wonder if somebody hadn't oughta tip George off," mused the bartender. "Tell him to call up his folks and say it ain't him. You think Miz Mar-gret is liable to worry any?"

"Miz Liz and Miz Nell won't let her," soothed the manager. "Just the

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same, I'd certainly like to talk to George. It could help to talk to George."

"He oughta come back home."

"Frank, nobody knows . . . nobody knows how I wish he'd come back home!" mourned the manager.

"Boys in the band feeling pretty sick, too."

"Going to be a lo-ong winter."

"Sweet guy, that George." The bartender's was a sentimental trade. "I dunno what it was about him . . . Gee, wouldn't I like to see him walk in . . . !"

The manager stifled a sob.

Kathy leaned over. "We have to go there," she whispered fiercely. "Now!"

"Suppose," said Mr. Blair cautiously, "I . . . er . . . see what I can find out."

"Just let's go," said Kathy and she rose.

"Kathy, please listen, my dear . . ." He caught up to her. "You can't go there!"

"But of course I can!"

"No, no, dear." His hands were kind but they held her. "It's a nasty mess. Didn't you hear him say homicide? George is evidently in jail. You can't go there."

"Why not?" she blazed.

"Because you mustn't be involved. Think of the newspapers! The whole moronic public licking its lips . . . Kathy, consider. George wouldn't *want* you to go through all that. You are too precious. *I* don't want . . ."

"What you want," said Kathy coldly, "and even what George would want, is not the point exactly. *I want!* Did you ever think of that? You don't even consider I'm alive! Also," her hair swung in a gleaming arc, "you don't mean 'precious.' You mean delicate and breakable! Well, I'm not breakable! I'm me! And if *I* want to be there when George is in trouble, I am going to be there!

"Oh, no," said Mr. Blair, losing his head.

"Oh, yes," said Kathy, turning her back.

"Oh, no," he cried, seizing her arm.

"Oh, yes," she cried, twisting away.

"Kathy," he blurted. "He isn't worth it!"

"Oh, isn't he?" said Kathy, very, very dangerously.

Mr. Blair groaned, regretting error. He let her run up the one flight of stairs. He followed. She ran to her room. He took a stand in the corridor.

He tried to think what to do or say now. If she insisted, why, he'd better take her to Snowden, defend her from what annoyance he could, regain

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what ground he had just lost, so foolishly. He wouldn't lose his head again!

Kathy opened her door, wearing her jacket, purse under her arm. She was so beautiful! Mr. Blair's head went looping away from him like a collar button under the dresser.

"Kathy!" he cried in his throbbing tenor. He took a step as if he would surge on one knee with hands up to plead . . .

She slipped back behind the half closed door. She picked the Cloak off the bed.

Had Mr. Blair not been so furiously occupied, retrieving his head for the second time and jamming it fiercely back in place, he might have noticed certain dainty depressions, dotting alone along the padded floor.

It was a crude little jail, but George was tight in a cell just the same, the only prisoner at the moment.

Beyond a thick door, he knew there was a kind of anteroom, and that there, side by side on hard straight chairs, Mrs. McGurk and the pig woman were waiting. He knew this because every now and then someone connected with the law would walk through this corridor. Whenever the end door at the left swung in, he could see that bare and dusty place, and the two of them.

George stared at the wall. The cell block smelled dismally of antiseptics. He felt anesthetized. He would rouse himself and his thoughts would go spinning around the circle of his anxieties. Kathy . . . whether Mr. Blair was being a problem . . . whether to insist that his people be notified . . . His mother and the Aunts, he knew, would march in close formation, right beside him, heads up, mouths firm, right through this trouble. Yet, if he could spare them any confusion before it was clear just what kind of trouble this was going to be, George felt he must.

Then there were the pig woman and Mrs. McGurk, both problems, and his legal status at their oddly assorted mercies. And there were the complications he'd left behind, about the big house . . . And other complications ahead. There was Mr. Blair. So his thoughts went around and came out at the same place and meanwhile, there arose about him the carbolic flavored, dreary, and somehow official smell of delay.

An attendant of some kind pushed the end door inward. Mrs. McGurk sailed around his bulk. She cried, "George!"

George rose politely. "What's happening?"

"They're waiting. As soon as somebody or other comes back, then they'll start asking questions. Oh, George! Her strange nose was pink from weeping and wrangling. "Remember," she whispered, "remember we can still get away."

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George roused in alarm. "No, no. Don't do that, Constance, please!"

"We can leave all this behind," she breathed. There was a light in her eye he groaned to see. "Everything behind us! Some desert isle . . . far, far away . . ."

George felt the impulse of his hair to stand on end. He could look right into her dream. He could see the hibiscus in her hair.

"That would be the worst thing you could possibly do," said George in a stern desperate whisper. "No, please. You'd better give me the Lamp."

"They'd only take it away from you. George, you must trust me!"

George tried very hard not to look as frightened as he felt. "I do," he said. "I know *you* know I can't spend the rest of my life a fugitive. I must clear my name. *You* understand!"

"I suppose so," she sniffled. It was on the tip of George's tongue to point out that he'd been whisked into that strange duel. It had been *her* doing. But he dared not. "Don't you know," he pleaded, "every time that trick is worked it only causes trouble?"

"Trouble for you, but oh, George, it wasn't trouble for me. It was my salvation!"

Mrs. McGurk had it all twisted around. She'd forgotten that Josef had been after George. She saw herself in the juiciest role, naturally. She was the Heroine. George was, of course, Her Hero. It was maddening.

George changed the subject. "Could you do anything with that pig woman?"

"Pig woman!" spat Constance. "I've talked and talked! She won't listen. We know she's lying. They'll have to believe us. They'll have to!"

But George thought to himself, No, they won't either have to. It was a queer thing, but Mrs. McGurk's obvious partisanship was going to make the truth sound like a lie, while the pig woman's lie, because she told it without heat, was going to shine forth as a simple impersonal objective statement of fact.

He shook his head. "There'll be some way to prove the truth," he soothed, trying to sound serene and confident. "Don't worry. Don't do anything. Nothing to do, but wait till they ask for our story."

Mrs. McGurk nodded. She straightened her tired back. "We'll tell our story," said she. But George saw right through to the female squirm of her judgment. "But if they don't believe it," Mrs. McGurk was saying darkly to herself, "I shall act! I, Constance, shall save him, in spite of himself!"

George stifled a groan. And as Mrs. McGurk, not entirely without realizing the drama of it all, let herself be led away, he beat his head on the bars. Tell their story, eh? Including one thing and another? George closed his eyes and winced all over.

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Kathy's voice said, "Hello."

The end door was swinging shut. He seemed alone. "Kathy, where are you?"

"George, have you had any food?"

"No," he said. "Yes. I mean, no. Kathy!"

"I brought you a couple of sandwiches," said she in business-like tones. He felt the package in his hand. As she let go of it, it became visible.

"Ham! Cheese! Darling!"

"And a thing of coffee." The hot carton came out of the air.

"Kathy, how . . . ?"

"I'll tell you while you eat." He could feel her presence, just outside his bars. "Golly, George, do you know something? Being invisible isn't what it's cracked up to be. I'm so battered. I took a bus and five people nearly sat on me. I was leaping from seat to seat the whole time. And it's 70 miles. You see, I didn't have any money, except this old gold, and it would have just caused a commotion. And Mr. Blair had the keys to his car in his pocket. George, I stole the food. Is it good? The only advantage when you're invisible is that you really can steal things quite easily."

George, even among the sandwiches, was a grin all over. He felt so much better he could hardly believe it. "Kathy, this coffee is delicious!"

"Did I sugar it right?"

"Oh, perfectly! Just perfectly!" How dear and close they were, even in so small a thing! Oh how much cosier was even trouble when it was built for two! "Kathy," he said, "we can get through this, somehow, if she only won't . . . take us apart."

Kathy said, "I want you to tell me. I'm trying to wait till you're not so hungry."

Angel! thought George, and washed down a big bite. Then he told her.

"Oh, dear!" said Kathy at last.

"Honey, was Mr. Blair . . . uh . . . ?"

"Well, not very," she said. But George knew the problem of Mr. Blair was not diminished. "Well." He could feel her brace up as she spoke. "What *can* we do? Let's see. George, I think I'll go and steal the Lamp."

"Say!"

"That would help, wouldn't it?"

"Boy, would it!"

"All right. That's one thing we can do. Of course, there's this." He felt the warm metal circle slip into his palm. The Ring! "We're pretty sure you've got one wish left," she reminded him. "The only trouble is . . . George, what should you wish?"

"Oh, Kathy, I w . . ."

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Her warm hand muffled his mouth. "Sssssh . . . Sssssh! For goodness sakes! This time, we've got to figure it out carefully."

"I guess that's right."

"Don't even speak," warned Kathy, "because . . . for instance, you could wish we had the Lamp, but it would be silly not to try to steal it first. Because maybe you'll need the wish to make the pig woman stop lying . . . but then . . . There are so many angles . . ." she wailed. "I think we better try everything else first and save the Ring for an emergency."

George wondered, for a moment, what she called an emergency. Then he pressed his lips tight. He agreed. For if, he thought, Mrs. McGurk were to whisk him off to a desert isle, *that* sure would be the emergency of all time!

Kathy's hand touched his goodbye. "Call the man, so he'll open the door." George diverted the attendant for a moment or two. Oh, wonderful Kathy! Say!

What if he and she . . . George and Kathy . . . were to be magically transported to a flowery isle? There was an idea. George stared at the wall. He knew right away it wasn't any good. A man can't leave what life is, in the name of life. No, if they were not to be with their kind, to mix in, to take part, to struggle humanly in the great complicated mesh that made the world of men, then what was life for? No . . . no good.

The Ring hung heavy on his hand. One magic wish! Just one! Darned if George could think what it ought to be.

In the anteroom, an unseen Kathy hovered over the ladies in their chairs. Mrs. McGurk was cross-examining. "Now," she said, "when you first caught sight of the car, what was happening?"

"You was screaming," said the pig woman readily.

"Why was I screaming?"

"Because the fella wid the sword just come outa the woods at ya."

"No, no, no," protested Mrs. McGurk.

"Fella wid the beard goes running around to get rid of him."

"Exactly! So it was self-defense."

"Sure it was. Fella wid the beard was defending the both of ya."

"No," screeched Mrs. McGurk. "Listen . . ." she began again.

Kathy saw no lamp-shaded bulges in the landlady's print dress. The Lamp must be in that fat handbag. And it, she discovered, was tied tight to Mrs. McGurk. No way to steal the handbag. Kathy touched the clasp with a careful forefinger. Alas, the clasp itself was tied around and around with cord.

Kathy drew back to think it over. Very well. Attack the problem another

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way. Ah, suppose Mrs. McGurk were not so sentimentally attached to George? Then, would she even think of whisking George and herself away where they couldn't be found? No, of course she wouldn't! Kathy took the Rose, invisibly, out of her own purse. It was worth trying, she thought in excitement. If only she could induce Mrs. McGurk to sniff the Rose a second time and then let her eye light on another, *not* George . . .

On whom? Kathy looked about her. Why, on the fat attendant, of course. He would do quite well. Kathy crept closer on quiet feet.

A great loop of Mrs. McGurk's hairdo had come loose and it bobbed and dipped with the vehemence of her continuing arguments. She paid no attention to the Rose, as Kathy tossed it into her lap.

"My wrists were tied behind my back!" she fumed. "Tied, mind you! I can prove it! Was it George who tied them?"

"I dunno," said the pig woman. "Was it?" Her flesh sagged all around the inadequate surface of the narrow chair. Her coarse hands were folded across her stomach. Her bulk was inert. Mrs. McGurk, in comparison, bounced like a pingpong ball. The Rose bounced in her rayon lap. Just then the attendant got up and went to the door, off on one of his mysterious strolls down George's corridor. Kathy reached for the Rose.

So, yawning, did the pig woman. Her big hand closed. Her thick fingers were in possession. Now the dainty blossom (Kathy watched it, helpless with dismay) moved in that coarse grasp towards the stub of her nose.

"Purty flower," said the pig woman. "Where'd this come from?" She sniffed. The hulking bosom heaved a sigh.

The attendant was returning!

He swung the door inward, as it must go, against himself. The pig woman's little eyes rested, naturally, on the opening gap. Her gaze passed through it, to where, snug in his cell, smack in the line of her sight, sat George.

The blob of flesh in the pig woman's chair began to surge. Somehow, it organized itself roughly into the figure of a woman. Kathy snatched back the Rose but . . .

"Say!" said the pig woman. "How long do they think they can keep that kid in this lousy clink, hey?"

"What!" Constance's jaw dropped.

The pig woman heaved to her feet. "You, Fatso, take me in there. I wanna see if he needs anything. Somebody oughta take care of him."

Constance gasped.

"Lissen, sister," said the pig woman, turning. The air churned like water under the Queen Elizabeth. "How come you're so innerested? Old enough to be his grandmaw, ain't you?"

"Whose grandma?"

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"HIS grandmaw. George's. George . . ." repeated the pig woman with a holy softness. Her weatherbeaten face was warm . . . nay, sunny . . . with affection. "Nothing bad is going to happen to a nice kid like HIM. I'll see to that!"

"YOU will!"

"Shuddup!" said the pig woman. "You been making a fool outa yourself long enough."

"Well, I . . . ! You old fat pig!"

"Rather be fleshy than a scrawny old crow," said the pig woman, ominously. "You let HIM alone."

"Who?"

"George."

"Oh?"

"Ay-ah."

"Hah!"

The pig woman's big mitt made a feint at the McGurk puss. The McGurk clawed for the scant and scrambled coiffure of the enemy. But the pig woman got a firm grip in return and Mrs. McGurk's switch left her.

By now, the attendant, with loud male shouts, had interposed himself. Reinforcements poured in from another room. With huffing and puffing, with yelps from their victim, with contributing screeches from Mrs. McGurk, at last they dragged the pig woman away. One of them humanely opened the door to reassure a frantic George that there had been only a little bloodshed.

Kathy slipped back to him. "Oh George . . ." she sobbed. "Oh . . . oh . . . look!"

The door had become wedged open. They could see Mrs. McGurk, settling her ruffled feathers. Pale with outrage, she perched on the edge of her chair. The cops were all busy, elsewhere, subduing their billowing witness. Mrs. McGurk was alone. Through the door, George and Kathy, watching with a horrid fascination, saw the landlady's hands and teeth begin to work on her handbag. She undid the cord. She dove into the bag. She took out the Lamp.

"Kathy . . . Kathy . . ." Their hands clung.

"Wish!"

"But what'll I wish?"

"Call to her . . . Stop her . . . !"

"Constance!"

Bosom heaving, eyes flashing, Mrs. McGurk was in no state to respond. She didn't hear. She was lifting the Lamp to . . .

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There came a sharp rap on the outer door.

It was a reprieve. "I beg your pardon," said a familiar tenor. "Oh, I say, it's you, isn't it?"

"How do?" said Mrs. McGurk, unenthusiastically.

"My name is Blair." He cleared his throat. "Is Miss Douglas here, anywhere, do you know?"

"Douglas? Oh, you mean that red-headed girl? No, no, she is not." Mrs. McGurk was brusque.

"But Hale is here?"

"In there," said Constance and her eyes blazed.

"Yes, I . . . er . . . see . . ." Mr. Blair swept the cell block with enough of a glance to see how empty it seemed of Kathy. He brushed by George with a formal little nod. (George, who stood with his hands held through the bars in so odd, so tense a position.) "Ah . . . I see you have the Lamp there," said Mr. Blair pleasantly.

Her hand tightened.

"Powerful little gadget, isn't it?" He gave her a magnetic smile and sat down beside her.

"Y'know, I have an idea."

He had, too. Kathy's hands writhed, if possible, closer to the hands of George. Their four hands were all bruised on the Ring . . .

"*I* could use that Lamp," drawled Mr. Blair, "whereas *you* might have some use for . . . this!" He took the Flask from his pocket. "This," he said and no salesman ever spoke with softer lure, "is water from the Fountain of Youth . . ." The last syllable fell on the sanitary air like the serpent's whisper in Eden. "You see, Mrs. . . . er . . . ?"

"McGurk," she murmured, hypnotically.

"I am *Bennett* Blair, you know."

Her gaze slid on the pink stone bottle. "Thought he was an older man . . ."

"He was," came the seductive voice. "I *was* old. Now, it appears to me that you . . . are fond of George? Isn't that so?"

"I am," she snuffled. "Oh, Mr. Blair, he is in such trouble and that horrible woman, she . . . bahoo!"

"My dear lady, there is nothing to worry about. Not now, that I am here."

"You mean you can help?" she quavered. "He killed a man!"

"I'm sure he never meant to," soothed Mr. Blair. "Why, of course, I'll help. I would like so much to have that Lamp," he continued with a glide of

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tone that pointed up the connection. "And you'd rather like to be . . . young again?"

"Young?" *Pig woman*, thought Mrs. McGurk, *ha ha!*

"George, George, he mustn't have it!"

A series of futile wishes paraded in George's head. Futile . . . futile . . . inadequate all.

"I can't find Kathleen, you see," Mr. Blair was murmuring. "I want so much to find her and . . . er . . . keep her."

"I see," said Mrs. McGurk, eyes riveted on the Flask. *Redhead, ha ha!*

"Wish, George! Wish!"

"But *what?* Oh Kathy, what will I wish?"

"I'm not so sure," said Mrs. McGurk, suddenly recalling her best self. "Now, I can use this Lamp to take George right out of this. But . . . er . . . the thing I had in mind . . . We'd need the Lamp, there. I won't," she said with stubborn devotion, "have George doing without well-balanced meals and the comforts of civilization."

"Oh, my dear girl!" cried Mr. Blair, reading her dream. "Don't do that! Pray don't! How much better to clear him of these charges, simply clear him. And then, both of you so young . . ."

She raised her tempted swimming eyes to his face. "How do I know you can get him free?"

"It will be simple. I happen to know certain officials of this state rather well. I believe I could exert certain pressures on people in even higher places, if necessary . . ."

"You're sure, now!" said Mrs. McGurk, lifting the Lamp in both hands.

"I am Bennett Blair," he laughed, reaching for it.

"But . . . Bennett Blair's an *old* millionaire. How will . . . ?"

"Exactly," said he, very quickly indeed. "Think of it! Only the day before yesterday, I was an old millionaire!" He dazzled her with a smile. "You, too," said Mr. Blair with the flawless technique of the radio commercial, "can be young again . . ."

Her mind was paralyzed. Her hands began to loosen.

But so did George's. He pulled them free. Now he knew what the wish must be!

Out there in the anteroom, the Lamp and the Flask hung in the air, passing. George spoke aloud in a shaking but solemn voice.

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"I WISH," said George, "THIS WAS THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY."

The Ring winked. "But in the morning!" cried George belatedly. (Oh, was it adequate, after all?) Their hands were locked again. The Ring blazed in the tangle of their fingers. "And oh . . . don't . . . don't . . ." pleaded George "don't let me forget! Not again! Don't let me forg . . ."

Time swirled in a kind of stew. All dissolved.

Thus, it became the day before yesterday.

"If you wish," said the proprietor, "sixteen dollarss and thiss. . . ."

"What's in it?" said George.

"Ssee?"

"Nuh-uh. What would I want with. . . ? Hey, what's that?" George spied the hilt of the Sword. What a magnificent old thing! He was attracted. Maybe . . . his mind was reaching for a good reason . . . maybe he ought to consider this deal. There might be something valuable in this carpet bag.

As he touched the hilt, something thrilled through to his hand. This blade in the crimson scabbard was old, very old. It was evil.

"No, no," murmured George mechanically.

"Maybe iss antique?" said his tempter. George didn't answer. Evil? The shadows all around him were drawn over evil unknown. He looked at his hand, where it merely touched the sword. There was no reason for this shiver, this ghost of horror.

George took his hand away and rubbed it on his trousers. He shook his head slightly to dispel this misty fright that was growing up around him. Silly! Nothing to be afraid of! Just a lot of old junk. He fished into the bag to see what else it held.

He drew out a little box with a sliding lid. George looked down at the rose. What was it, anyhow?

"You take?" whispered the old old man.

George stared at him dumbly. Time rustled by, like feathers dragging. There was something wrong. Something was pricking on his nerves.

But, in George's upbringing, there was no tradition of nerves. One went ahead and did the right thing, regardless of how one felt. That was his training and it stiffened him, now. Maybe this was a chance . . .

He stood, hesitating. It was strange how time hung, as if the unwinding ribbon of it snagged on a point. As if George was balanced between two futures. And was it real? Were there two real futures? Does it matter, when we try? Are we free to chose? Looking back, we think we see . . . we *seem* to learn.

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George thought, Yes, it matters. What we do, how we choose, where we push, how we aim . . . Being men, we must, to call ourselves alive, believe it matters. Dreaming, he swayed on the point of decision, teetering there, held in this whirling gust of strange unbidden thoughts.

Then the proprietor chose to push at the balance. "Thiss," he said, shifting closer. "thiss rose . . ." His ancient finger gave it a sly poke. He turned his wrinkled face up and it broke into a smile George didn't like, "iss Rose of Luff!" said the man with hideous glee.

(It was glee for George. George didn't need anybody's glee. George didn't like it.)

"You let girlss smell thiss . . . they luff!"

George closed the box. He felt a little ill of his distaste. "No, thanks," said George quietly. "I don't think I need anything of this sort."

He turned and burst back through the heaps of stuff towards the light. He ran out into the street and gulped the fresh air. He was shaking a little, as if he'd just almost had an accident. "Don't *need*," he heard himself saying. Well, now, how true that was!

He came to a drugstore; he found the phone booth; he put in his nickel. His throat all but closed up when he heard her voice.

She wasn't angry. He could tell!

"Kathy," said George, slowly and clearly, "when you said you wouldn't wait, *what did you mean?*"

"I thought you'd never ask!" Her voice was strong and fresh and glad. "I meant I don't *want* to wait. *I want* . . ."

"Kathy," cried George, "Darling! Marry me! Right away!"

"I certainly will! I certainly will! That's it! That's what I meant! Oh, George I'm so glad you c-called . . ."

"If Mr. Blair keeps back all your money," groaned George.

"You don't want it, do you?"

"Who? Me!" cried George, horrified.

"Well, I thought not. So, pooh!" She switched in the most enchanting way. "We'd better run away," she said practically, "to Maine, I think. The cheapest way. We'll take a bus, George."

"Oh," said George, "dearest Kathy, meet me . . . oh darling . . . meet me on the corner!"

Mrs. McGurk stood behind her front room curtains with the sign in her hand, savouring this moment of delicious power. George was off, bag and baggage, and a cute red-headed trick, besides. Sister? Mrs. McGurk thought, cynically, not. Bride? Well, if so, *she* wanted no newly-weds in her house. Always so much in love . . . never had any leverage on them.

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Now, she thought, take him. This one, coming up the steps to the stoop. Very prompt with the rent, he was. And serious minded. "How do, Mr. Josef," she greeted him pleasantly.

He bowed. "Good afternoon, Madame." He fingered his beard. His eyes slanted to the card. "Someone has left us?" He implied that he deduced it.

"Hale. Fourth floor."

"Ah," said Mr. Josef. "And the next occupant?" He watched her face slyly for any hint of a plot.

"I'll tell you one thing about the next occupant," said Constance cheerfully. "He will have a full month's rent in advance."

She raised her hand. She put the sign, the symbol of her power, in the window. That simple, potent, magic word, "Vacancy."

Fraulein stood in Mr. Blair's lair, twisting unhappy hands. "So I pack for her, Mr. Blair. What else can I do? Oh, sir, do you think . . . once they marry . . . that she will want me?"

He grunted.

"Can she afford me?" asked Fraulein boldly.

Mr. Blair looked up over his glasses. He took them off. He rubbed the vague persisting ache in his knobby knuckles. "Of course she can afford you," he said irritably. "I can't keep the child's fortune from her. I used all the pressure I could bring to bear," he continued waspishly, "but the young won't listen, they'll make mistakes." He brooded. "Sometimes," he said to Fraulein's listening face, and knew not why he said it, "I shudder to think of the mistakes one makes, being young." He shook his own (bald) head.

"I am glad if she is happy," said Fraulein stoutly. "This George is a good man?"

A thin, reluctant smile approached the old fish mouth. "As a matter of fact," he admitted, "this George . . . and I have checked . . . *is* a good man."

"And they love!"

"That, of course, makes everything rosy!" said Mr. Blair sourly.

But not as sourly as he might have.

Darkness gathered over New England. The chill sky pressed down.

Inside, the bus reeked of gasoline, tired people, old candy bars. Gum wrappers and scratchy little gobs of cellophane grated under shifting feet. There was a baby, of course, and a man with a rasping snore. Now and then, the bus screamed to a stop. Clumsy folk blundered in and out, stirring the stale air with piercing draughts. Again, they would slam on through the night.

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But Kathy was snug in a seat by the window. Her hair was a pool of gold on George's shoulder. ". . . know what you'd call success," she murmured sleepily, "when everybody in the whole town, probably the whole state of Maine, adores you. And me, too, besides . . ."

George filled his soul with the sweet warm scent of her hair. He wasn't really worried about success, right now. For him, the bus was flying, gossamer light, through the soft cool night. It was a dear chariot, carrying ALL. And all within . . . the baby fretting pinkly up ahead, the old man, sleeping in noisy peace across the aisle, the middle-aged wife with the beautiful worry lines on her mother-face, the work-soiled, black-nailed, strong man's hand on the back of the next seat, all, all he knew and loved. All their pale faces in the weak light yet were aglow and gilded with something more.

For he loved her, loved them, loved all.

"Why it's like Magic! thought George. It *is* Magic! And he saw the world, and all its knots and problems, transformed, illuminated, and the pattern changed, by the beautiful blaze of the magic enchanting his eyes.

The bus winged on.

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